

Of Chainsaws and Shotguns...COMPLETE

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Summary: Ash, slayer of the EVIL DEAD, gets transfered to Sunnydale...And meets Xander...Who knows what could happen with those two...

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Of Chainsaws and Shotguns...

>By Danii

>Hiya, folks! This is my first Evil DeadArmy of Darkness fanfic, so be kind to me. It is a crossover, I'll admit. With Buffy the Vampire Slayer, though it focuses on Xander, her friend. I have to state for the legal sticklers that I own no one. NO ONE. And that I write this stuff for fun and not for profit. I am a poor teenager, not worth the trouble...Anywho, I hope you enjoy this little fic, which I started the day I saw the movies, and if you do, please tell me cause I don't have a lot of confidence in my writing, and feedback eases the savage critic inside me...NOT BETA READ...and fight scenes aren't my forte, so be kind...

>

>"The time has come, the young girl typed, to write of many things...
Of shotguns, Necronomicons,

>And Ash who coulda been king...
And why the chainsaw never runs out of gas,

>And why Deadites get wings..."

>
It was a nice day. A nice day in Sunnydale, California. That meant that not only was the weather rather pleasant, but that no species of hell-spawn was on the prowl as well. All in all, a rare and fine day.

>
And on this very nice day, which lacked rain clouds and demons, Alexander Harris was walking around the newest addition to the particularly small Sunnydale Mall, a large chain store by the name of S-Mart.

>
He didn't exactly want to be there. There is something in the Y-chromosome that causes all who posses it to loathe any activity that involves trading small green slips of paper for items other than beer and toilet paper. But he was there nonetheless, because the girls had asked him to check out the store and see if there was

anything decent there. Xander didn't see the point. No matter what he said, they wouldn't believe him. They'd say he had no clue as to what was a good shopping spot, then go and check it out themselves, completely forgetting that it was their idea to send him there in the first place.

>
Two words stuck in his mind from that thought. The girls. Buffy. Willow. Cordelia. They seemed to think he was useless, a bother. The first two were so worried about him and how susceptible he was to attack during a fight, and the other, his supposed girl-friend, seemed determined to keep their relationship in the closet, both figuratively and literally. It bugged him to the core.

>
But what really bugged him was how things had changed. In the beginning, there was Willow, Buffy, Giles, and himself. Two normal people who were out of their minds to be helping a Vampire Slayer and a Watcher, and the said Slayer and Watcher. Now, it seemed, it was a bunch of really kick-ass people fighting evil side by side with the Slayer...and Xander, that normal guy whose only use was to distract one demon by letting it beat the crap out of him. It bugged the hell out of him.

>
Xander pulled himself from these gloomy thoughts, and thought of why he was there. He had to admit it was a decent place, clean and well rounded in merchandise. Xander had especially like the sporting goods department. His time as a soldier during the Halloween episode had left him with an amazing amount of skill, knowledge, and a love of guns.

>
It was then that he realized that he'd been there almost an hour. He felt bad about hanging around so long, so to ease his guilt, he decided to get a pack of gum and a magazine so the trip wouldn't be a total waste of time.

>
He knew the majority of people manning the registers. Most attended school with him, or rather, in the same school with him. He didn't have many friends apart from those he helped save the world with. However, the man who was at his register was a mystery.

>
He was tall and broad-shouldered, the parts not covered by his uniform showing him to be exceedingly muscular. He looked to be in his early thirties, his face having slightly heavy classic good looks. But on that face was a multitude of scars. Not the kind that one would get from major trauma, like that Mel Gibson movie a few years back, but rather several light brown lines across his face and one over his lips. Above that scar-filled face was dark brown, or perhaps black hair, slicked back and looking rather sharp. However, the thing that truly caught his attention was the metal hand. It looked like something from the Middle Ages; in short, nothing Xander could see modern science thinking up.

>
"How'd you get that?" The young man asked finally as the S-Mart employee pushed his gum over the scanner.

>
The mysterious man, whose ID tag read "Ash" looked at him for a moment blankly, then looked down at his own odd appendage. His eyes shone for a moment then, then seemed to dull. "You wouldn't believe me..."

>
"Why do you say that?" Xander persisted. He'd seen several things that most people wouldn't believe during his time in Sunnydale. This guy couldn't have anything that bizarre, even if the young man was nearly sure that such flexibility in a fake member hadn't been achieved by modern science to date. "Train wreck? Car crash?"

>
The clerk chuckled under his breath, his brown eyes sparkling with some secret old joke. "Nope. Not even close. As I said, you wouldn't believe me..."

>
"And why not?" Xander asked, determined to hear the story.

>
"Because..." the man at the register answered, "No one has believed. At least not in the last five years..."

>
"Why?"

>
The man rolled his eyes with a smile, then looked at the clock which hung from the wall of the store. "Look, tell you what...I get off in five minutes. If you wait for me, I'll tell you all about it, okay?" His voice told Xander that he didn't expect the boy to stay.

>
"Sure" answer the younger man with a grin. "I'm curious. You look to have had an interesting life. Besides, I've got nothing better to do..."

>
The man behind the counter looked surprised. He hadn't expected that. And besides, that last bit had sounded a bit bitter. For some reason, this kid and his curiosity made him curious himself. As he put the boy's items in the bag, he wondered what was bugging the kid this badly. Though he wasn't about to tell the young man, he'd been watching him as he wandered around the store. And for a man to be in a store for that long without a girl when he wasn't working there, something had to be seriously wrong.

>
Xander took his things, then walked out the automatic door. When he was out, he took a post near the door with his back to the wall and waited. As promised, the S-Mart employee walked out five minutes later. The older man looked pleasantly surprised when he saw the boy, but Xander could tell that the man had had a feeling he'd be there.

>
"You waited..." the man said. It was more of a statement than anything.

>
"Yeah?" Xander said, "I said I would, didn't I?"

>
"Yeah..." the clerk answered in an oddly good-natured voice, "You did, didn't you..."

>
Xander looked at him strangely, then went right to the point. "So?"

>
The tall man looked at him with an amused disgust. "Kid, this ain't the kind of story you tell out in the open. Besides, I want to sit down and have some food before we talk."

>
"Okay" Xander sounded a bit disappointed.

>
"I may be new, but I found a little diner near here. Just a block or two. Good food, day or night... Let's get some food in our stomachs, then we'll talk."

>
"Okay..."

>
So both of them walked the one block to the diner in silence. It wasn't exactly comfortable silence, but there was no animosity in it. The two were strangers, but they could each feel themselves clicking with the others in the quiet walk to the diner. When they got there, the clerk quickly got them a table, and they sat down.

>
"So? Tell me..." Xander began as they looked through the menus at the diner.

>
"Lemme order..." the clerk said in a slightly irritated tone.

>
Xander shut up and poured through the menu himself, finally settling on a good-looking hamburger meal. In a minute or two, the waitress came, took their order and their menus, then left. The second she was out of earshot, Xander asked again.

>
The older man looked at the younger. He obviously wasn't one for patience. Then again, the man grinned to himself, neither am I...He had to admit he liked this boy. He reminded him in so many ways of himself, curious to a fault and cynical. The man wondered what had

happened to make the boy that cynical that early. He'd had to chainsaw his girlfriend. What had happened to this boy?

>
The boy wanted to know, he observed. The clerk played with the idea of refusing now, but quickly banished it. The kid had gone to a lot of effort to find out his story. It wouldn't be right to deny him now. Besides, it would be nice if the kid believed him. No one had since that incident in housewares back at his first store. Then again, that time, he'd had a Deadite corpse as evidence.

>
"It all started with a trip. A trip with my girlfriend. Linda and I were head to her uncle's house in Tennessee, but we stopped at this old cabin. It seems that an archeologist had come to that remote little place to translate and study his latest find: Necronomicon Ex Mortis, the Book of the Dead..."

>

>"And I said, 'Gimme some sugar, baby...'"

>"You know you're damned lucky you were in medieval Europe at the time. Any girl in this day and age woulda kneed you for that macho crap..."

>"Look, kid. When you have dealt with all the crap I had to deal with, then you can say macho crap. It's your damned right to say macho crap. I've earned the right to be the designated macho crap-spewing guy!"

>"Okay..."

>
"And I never wanted to see that place again. So, as soon as I heard about the Sunnydale stores need for veteran workers, I asked for the transfer. Sunnydale sounded friendly and danger-free. I found an apartment on Cross St., settled in, then I met you today. That's pretty much it... So, what do you think, kid?"

>
Xander just looked at him.

>
"Do you believe me? Talk!"

>
The boy's blue eyes twinkled, and his lips curved into a smile.

>
"Neat."

>
"Neat?!" Ash quoted in surprise. He'd heard every reaction to his story he'd ever thought he could get, including one with language he didn't even feel comfortable repeating in his head, however 'neat' had not been one of the possible answers. At least not to his mind.

>
"Yeah...neat." Xander repeated, " You're like a Slayer or something, like my friend Buffy!"

>
"Slayer?" Asked Ash, even more confused. What was the boy talking about? And what did he have a feeling it wasn't going to make his life happier?

>
Xander smiled, then said "Remember how you said you thought Sunnydale was friendly and danger-free?"

>
"Yeah..."

>
"You are so wrong it's funny..." Xander exclaimed, "This town has the highest missing persons rate on the planet, truly if not on the records, and most classes in my high school lose at least one student a month..."

>
"Are you telling me that this town is like Deadite central?" Ash asked, a large gaping pit beginning to form in his stomach. He prayed to every god there was that his life couldn't suck this much. That he had gotten away from the evil and that the boy was going to tell him he was just kidding.

>
"No, never seen any Deadites..." Xander admitted, "However, we've got a lovely selection of vampires, hell-beasts, ghouls, demons, and creatures etc... for every occasion..."

>
Ash's metal hand slammed into the table, denting it badly.

"God-dammit!" he cried, "This was an iron-clad transfer!"

>
"What?" asked Xander, perplexed.
>
"The transfer here is iron-clad. They really need veteran workers here, so they made any transfer here iron-clad. Meaning I can't leave this hellhole!"
>
"Hellmouth..."
>
"Whatever!"
>
"Well then," Xander said with a glimmer to his eyes, "you had better gas up that chainsaw, cause you're gonna need it in this town, Mr..."
>
"Williams. Ashley J. Williams. But call me Ash..."
>
"Okay, Ash. By the way, my name's Xander... Xander Harris."

>
"Pleased to meet you..." Ash grumbled, angry at the world in general.
>
Both were silent for a moment, then Ash spoke.
>
"So, Sunnydale's a dangerous place?"
>
"Yeah..."
>
"How'd you find out about all this? Or is it common knowledge, and you people just stick around to laugh at the poor dumbasses who move here..."
>
"Well, I've lived here all my life, but I didn't discover the whole Hellmouth thing till I met this new girl named Buffy Summers. I bumped into her, and a stake dropped out of her bag. I found it and returned it, my best friend Willow in tow, and then my world flipped upside down and got the shaking of a lifetime..."
>
>"Nifty, I guess..." said Ash as Xander finished his summary of the last three years of his life. They'd been there close to four years now, the food long gone from the table.
>"So you see what I'm saying about Sunnydale being a dangerous spot?"
>"I get it..." Ash said angrily, "But what I don't get is how you, Xander Harris, has survived all this crap over the years being the normal human being you are."
>Xander gave him an odd yet pointed look, then said "You learn to survive after a while, or you don't learn anything cause you're six feet under..."
>"I gotta agree with you there, kid..." Ash replied, fingering the large crooked scar near his chin, "Hell, you're probably as good as I am at it, though I figure you need a little training..."
>"I guess so," Xander replied, with a little nod, "I mean, I'm good with guns, but lead doesn't work on much here on the Hellmouth."

>"Firstly, there are very few things that can't be killed by shotgun decapitation. That I know..." Ash said with a determined grin, "And secondly, did you say good with guns?"
>"Let's just say that I armed that rocket launcher I told you about..."
>"Yeah, you can arm em' and work em', but can you shoot em'?" Ash asked, a challenge in his eyes.
>Xander picked up on that mischievous and daring look. "Sure."

>This discussion brought them out to a barn on the outskirts of Sunnydale. It had been there forever, but no one ever used it, except for Xander who took his dad's rifle to do target practice there every once in a while. He practiced not because he needed to, but because it was stress relieving, and a good way to clear the mind. Needless to say, he went there a lot.
>They'd gone in Ash's car, a 90' Oldsmobile that had seen better

days. While it was nowhere near the state of Ash's old car, it certainly wasn't in the best condition. They would have walked, except that the S-Mart employee had stopped to get two bundles of guns from his apartment, and he didn't feel like carrying them all that way.

>While Ash had by no means brought all the weapons of Deadite destruction with him, he had still brought quite a collection. As he opened the one bundle, Xander could see several shotguns and other assorted guns, his Halloween-induced memories giving him names and information for each one.

>"You know how to use one of these?" Ash asked, holding up a one-barreled affair.

>Xander looked at him as if he was asking 'can you add two plus two' then laughed. "Please..."

>"Okay, hotshot, how about this? This time, the salesclerk held up a Winchester.

>"Sure. Easy. Nice piece, though..." Xander said.

>Ash smiled. Kid knew his stuff. The clerk held the gun up for the boy, who took it with an experienced hand.

>"Fully loaded" Xander stated. It wasn't a question. "So, what do you want me to hit? I didn't have any more bull's-eyes at home, and there's not much here..."

>The other man looked around, trying to find something suitably challenging for the little hotshot to hit. It took a minute or two, but he finally found something. A small candle on the other side of the barn obviously left there by someone. It was perfect.

>"That" Ash said at last, pointing. The young man looked to where he was indicating, then smiled.

>"NOW!" Ash bellowed, trying to scare the boy. He wasn't interested in how the boy shot. He was interested in how the boy shot when he was scared. There is a large difference in most people.

>Xander, startled but still under control, pulled the trigger. A click and a boom later, the candle was flying in the air.

>"Cute." Said the young boy, obviously knowing what Ash was looking to do.

>"Okay. I guess you can shoot." Ash said, perhaps a little proud, "And more importantly, you can shoot while there's something startling you. But I'd like to see how you do with a moving target..."

>"What exactly are you proposing, Mr. Williams?" Xander asked with a wicked grin, "I'm up for it."

>"A little competition..." Ash replied, grunting as he opened the other bundle he had with him. Inside were a bunch of paintball guns and several containers of ammo for them. "You, me, the woods. Sound like fun?"

>"Sure" Xander said, taking a paintball gun from the floor, "But take one of these..."

>The boy then took a wooden stake out from a previously unknown position on his person and handed it the older man.

>"Vampires." Xander answered, clearing up Ash's confused look, "I've never seen them in this area before, but better safe than sorry..."

>Ash, who knew the value of being prepared, took the offered stake, mentally applauding Xander for his common sense and paranoia. Well, he couldn't call it paranoia. It's not really paranoia when everyone, or rather, thing IS out to get you. He understood that.

>They left the barn without another word, splitting up as soon as they got outside. They were almost even when it came to shooting, thought Xander was a good bit better at it than Ash. But Ash had an edge, a survival instinct, and ended up with a lot less paint on him than Xander did. Not that Xander was bad. Against a normal boy his age, he would have triumphed. But not Ash.

>They played till daylight, which was a considerable amount of time, then collected their things and headed to Ash's apartment.

>They both got into the car, and since Xander was offering no direction, the scarred man figured that the boy had no want to return home. So he drove to his own home, the apartment they had stopped at before.

>When they got out, Ash was about to tell Xander to scat, but the boy was looking so lonely, he just couldn't. The kid looked up at his apartment building longingly, then at Ash. Ash, who was really a mush about some things, waved him over in a silent invitation to stay. Xander smiled sheepishly, then followed.

>They shared the load equally, the young man taking the paintball bundle, and Ash taking the guns. Together, they carried them up the three flights of stairs to Ash's apartment, and then dumped them as soon as possible.

>The apartment was pretty bare, but that wasn't surprising. According to Ash, he hadn't been there all that long, and so hadn't unpacked yet. Xander could see the evidence of this scattered around the small, but tidy apartment. Boxes filled with who knew what. But there was one thing up already. On top of the mantel was a dirty old chainsaw with an odd attachment.

>"Is that..."

>"Yeah," Ash grunted as he put away the guns and other things, "That's the one that got me through everything."

>"Nifty."

>"Thanks kid..." Ash said with a smile as he finished putting everything away in a small cupboard. Xander smiled back.

>There was a silence again, this one more familiar but just as awkward.

>Finally, Ash asked, "What's on your mind, kid?"

>"Nothing..."

>"Bull." Ash retorted with an annoyed look, "Kid, you're upset about something. Please, tell me. Maybe I can help?"

>"Well," Xander started nervously, "I was wondering..."

>"Yes?"

>"Would you train me a bit?" There. It was said. Now, Xander though, it's up to him. The seconds slowed then, and perhaps even the universe took a deep breath. The world has been changed by simpler questions...

>"Sure kid." Ash answered at last, perhaps changing the fate of the world with those two words, " I like you. You kinda remind me of myself when I was your age. Besides, I think you have th...the Spark. The spunk to live. And the determination.

>"But you had better be ready to work. I'm not going to make you do any dumb menial labor like those TV shows. But you will work. Every day, if you can take it. It's your choice how hard you work, and that choice affects how good you can be. So, I want you here at 5, after my shift, whenever you want to train, as long as you can handle it."

>Those eyes that had seen far too much blood looked into Xander's and told him exactly how things were. Xander nodded solemnly.

>"But I do have a favor to ask" Ash continued, "Could you show me around the town and all that? Teach me all about this Hellmouth crap?"

>"I'll do you one better." Xander answered, his smile returned to his face, "Not only will I help you adjust to the Hellmouth, I'll work on some new attachments for that hand of yours..."

>"Groovy." Ash responded with a goofy grin.

>And thus began an apprenticeship that would become a partnership. A partnership that would turn the Hell-beast ridden town of Sunnydale, CA on its ear.

>
"Behind you, King!" Xander yelled at Ash across the dark alley.

>
At the young man's yell, the scarred S-Mart employee immediately spun, his broadsword cleanly (well, as clean as you can be when you cleave through a body part) cutting through the vampire's neck, slicing off its head. The body immediately became dust, and Ash turned back to the bloodsucker in front of him. He cut left and right, vampires exploding in clouds of powdery dust.

>
Across the alley, Xander fought two of the demonic beings, slashing at them with his newly bought katana. While it didn't have the history of his mentor's blade, it was a good weapon and did its job well.

>
"Kid, watch your head!" Shouted Ash loudly when there was a break in his fight. Xander looked up and realized that his next kick, if it had been executed, would have sent his head into a wooden board, and he would have been a goner. He nodded quickly towards his companion, and then set to work moving the fight away from the boards. As soon as he was out of range, he executed his move and the vampire was toast.

>
The second one was now open, and he quickly dispatched that one as well. However, when Xander saw that three more were coming, he knew he had to find his stake, at least one of them. He'd brought three of them on this run, but he'd lost the first in a skirmish on the way to this nest, and the other two he'd lost in the fight. And while the katana was nice, it was much easier to use a stake.

>
Finally, he remembered that board, and returned to it. Snapping off a good-sized piece, he got ready for the three coming at him. The board was good wood, and it would be serviceable, if not as nice as the aerodynamically shaped ones he'd made at home. But you gotta use what you got.

>
As for Ash, he'd already dusted five of the creatures, and more were coming. On his hand was a stake attachment that Xander had made for him over two months ago. It had been the first of many the surprisingly handy young man had made for him, and the most used. They'd been going out on "cleaning" missions, as the two called them, for the past two weeks, at first to test the boy's training, then later just because it was a way to keep sharp.

>
It had taken a lot of effort to get to this point. Xander had come everyday at 5PM, and learned everything Ash had to teach him. It had been tough. He had trained for 4 hours, and then he would work on hand attachments for Ash for an hour after that. Ash himself had been and still was amazed at the boy's energy and persistence. He knew that he couldn't have kept up with it at this pace. In fact, just teaching the kid for that long had tired him out, and he didn't do half of what the boy was doing.

>
Besides that, Xander was a very good student. Very good. He learned things with remarkable speed, and more importantly, he built on what he was taught. Ash hadn't taught him any style of fighting unparticular, because Ash didn't know one. He had only taught Xander

what he knew: how to fight something impossibly strong and quick and win. Xander excelled at it.

>
In the clerk's tutelage, he had learned how to use the staff, the spear, the sword, several throwing weapons, and the chainsaw. Ash even got Xander his own chainsaw, a snazzy compact black one, out of his paycheck as a gift for the boy. Xander had been delighted, like a child with a new toy.

>
And as Xander grew in skill, he also grew as a person, both physically and mentally. All the training developed his muscles into lean, hard machines, and all the fluid fighting moves he had learned had transformed his step from loud and childlike to mature and graceful. His personality had changed as well. He was more adult now, with less concern about other's opinions of him. His joking nature had not changed; it was just more appropriate now. All in all, if you hadn't watched the gradual change, you wouldn't have been able to connect the two, except by the raffish smile.

>
Xander's relationship with Ash had also grown. The two had become fast friends quickly, and, at this point, Ash was like a father to Xander more than anyone else. Xander had even taken to bunking at Ash's apartment most nights. His parents didn't care where he was, so there was no problem. They'd go out and slay vampires by the nest, taking out the bloodsuckers quickly and efficiently. It was great fun. Ash assured him that vampires were a good deal easier to exterminate than Deadites, and Xander was glad.

>
The fight continued for a little bit, then ended as Xander saw the last vampire, a girl he remembered from his high school, turn to dust before his eyes. As soon as the tiny particles hit the ground, Xander made his way over to his teacher.

>
"Good run, Kid." Ash said, pride dripping from his voice.

>
"Same with you, King..." Xander replied, throwing his arm around the other man's shoulders. King was Ash's nickname, one they'd devised to hide their identities in case of trouble. Xander had come up with the idea, and initially, Ash hadn't liked it. But Ash had a soft spot for Xander and had come around when he saw the practicality of it. Besides, Xander had said, King was a good nickname.

>
The two walked home to Ash's apartment, put away their weapons, then promptly fell onto their respective beds. That was one great thing about vampire slaying with Ash. No talks. No discussion. No frumpy British Watcher telling them about stuff. When you did a good job, you got to go home and sleep.

>
But Xander couldn't sleep. He was too busy thinking about how his life had changed. He had Ash now, a friend and father, but as Xander had grown closer to the S-Mart clerk who he deemed as his best friend, he had drifted away from his other friends. He barely ever saw Buffy or Willow outside of class, and he never saw Cordelia outside of the broom closet. But what really bothered him was that they didn't seem to miss him. They made no attempt to contact him. They were too concerned with their own lives. The closest thing he had seen to worry was his girlfriend's questions about his new muscles.

>
All that changed around a month later. Buffy cornered him in an empty classroom.

>
"Xander?" she asked, closing the door to the room with a rather final sounding click, "Where have you been going after school?"

>
"To a friend's..." Xander answered shortly. Ash's attitude had rubbed off on him a bit, and while some might not have liked it, he'd learned that the only person you have to answer to is yourself.

>
"What friend?" Buffy asked, giving him the look she usually reserved for Willy at the bar, "Who?"
>
"You wouldn't know him..." Xander responded with a smug grin.

>
"The one you work out with?" Buff ventured.
>
"Yeah, you could say that..." Xander answered vaguely.

>
There was silence for a moment, and then Buffy broke it. She rushed over to him, the interrogator act gone, and hugged him into a wall.

>
"Xander please!" she cried, "We're all worried about you! You've been gone so much, and you've been so different..."

>
Xander held his tongue as it burned to sarcastically comment about how much they were 'worried' about him.

>
"And now," Buffy continued, a bit upset, "there's these two psychos running around-"

>
"What?" asked Xander.

>
"I noticed there were not many vampires around, so I went to Willy to ask about it..." Buffy said, obviously upset, "Then he tells me these two crazy hunters came out of nowhere about a month and a half ago, destroying nests left and right."

>
Xander fought bravely against the smile that was forming on his lips and kept it in.

>
"Do you know who they are?" Xander asked, his face straight.

>
"No!" Buffy cried, "No one does! Not even the vampires. I met one in the bar, a survivor of one of these lunatic attacks. He just said that they were like the wind, cutting through their ranks like they've never seen. And all he heard was the names 'King' and 'Kidd', he says..."

>
"Why would a vampire tell you the truth?" Xander asked, trying to dismiss the whole thing, "I mean, they're probably starting something deep in the ground and they don't want you to know about it..."

>
"No, Xander." Buffy told him, her eyes somber, "This one was scared. Of me, of them. I threatened to stake him if he was lying, and he said he didn't care, that he was telling the truth."

>
"Damn..." Xander muttered under his breath.

>
"What?" Buffy asked, wondering what he'd said.

>
"I said, 'Damn, that must be serious.'" Xander covered, "But I don't think you should worry. If they're fighting vampires, they gotta be on the side of good."

>
"I don't know, Xander." The Slayer replied, breathing in deeply, "I just don't want them moving to people."

>
"Buffy, I can assure you, they won't..." Xander said. But the second the words left his lips, he knew he had made a huge mistake.

>
"How do you know?" Buffy said, trying to push him into the wall. But for some reason, it didn't work. He stood firm against her. She tried again, this time so that she could leave. But Xander had her arms in a gentle, if firm, hold.

>
"Trust me..." Xander said, looking at her straight in the eyes. Buffy, having no alternative but to stare back saw something strange in those dark blue orbs. Usually, they would hold a smile, or perhaps fear. Now, Xander's eyes held a sort of liquid calm, as if he were a rock in the middle of a raging storm. She wanted to say that he had changed, but he really hadn't. He was the same old Xander; he'd just grown up. She wasn't thinking about his height, or his size. It was inside. Inside, he had matured into a different person. The Xander

she knew and loved was still there, his smile still on this man's lips, the shine in his eyes the shine of Xander's. But this was different.

>
"I do..." Buffy whispered back, "But please tell me whom you've been hanging out with..."

>
Xander looked deep into her eyes, then turned away. "Not my secret to tell..."

>
Buffy looked at her friend, who had always been straight with her and helped her out, and knew that it was still him. Even if he wasn't telling her what he knew, she recognized that he was still helping her out.

>
"Fine, Xander..." she said with renewed calm, "You don't have to tell me. And I respect that...but if your secrecy hurts anyone, I will put you through pain..."

>
With these words, she turned to the door, but Xander, moving quicker than she had ever seen him move, grabbed her wrist once more in that tender, unyielding grasp.

>
"Already done that, Buffy" he said with no trace of a smile on his lips, "Already done that enough..."

>
And with that, he let her go and walked out before her, leaving her in the room to ponder just what was going on.

>

>"Giles!"

>A head covered with brown hair popped up from behind the shelves.

>Buffy smiled at him quickly, and then jogged over so she was in front of him. "Giles, there's something up with Xander..."

>Giles, who had just awakened to the world from bookland, heard "Xander" and "something", which didn't help him much. "Whah?"

>Buffy grimaced, and then pulled her Watcher up. "I said, there...is...something... up...with...Xander!"

>"Oh" replied the Watcher intelligently.

>Buffy scowled at Giles, then pulled him to the large table in the middle of the library. Once there, she sat him down, then seated herself next to him.

>"No, seriously. There's something up with the Xandman..." she reiterated, this time, allowing the worry to permeate her voice.

>"Has it anything to do with his eh...personal matters?" Giles asked, remembering the several evil beings who had tried to date the young man over the years.

>"No, for once the demons do not have a crush on Xander, but something is up..." she said, "I mean, have you seen him recently? He's eh, um, well...grown."

>"How so?"

>"He's been working out a lot, at least I think he has..." Buffy said, frowning to herself.

>"And this is a problem?" Giles snorted, "I should think that would be a wonderful thing. He is probably doing it so he can better help during battles, Buffy."

>"I know, Giles, but I don't think that he's battling with me anymore. I think he found someone new..." Buffy's eyes were downcast as she said it, filled with pain at the seeming loss of Xander and worry about this new hunter.

>"Someone new? A vigilante, you mean?"

>"A deadly one..." The Slayer replied, her eyes locking with his, her voice deadly serious, "The one that's been hacking through nests...the one I found out about from Willy..."

>"But, Buffy, you were told there were two of th-" Giles stopped, and then thought about what he was going to say. In a moment, the Watcher's mind went over every piece of information. "Oh dear."

>"I think he's the 'Kid' in 'King and Kid'..." Buffy said after Giles realized what she was saying.

>"Well" the librarian said slowly, thinking as he spoke, "What exactly do you intend to do about it?"

>"I don't know, Giles. I don't know..." Buffy replied, again showing the ache in her eyes, "But I do know that I've got to find this 'King' person..."

>"Indeed you do, because you will probably need to ask his help..." Giles said quickly, back to his firm ground, black and white business.

>"His help?" The young girl exclaimed, standing up in the process out of aggravation.

>"Yes, Buffy, his help..." Giles said slowly.

>"Why?"

>"Well," Giles explained, "Firstly, I am sure that he would be a helpful asset to have against the Mayor. Secondly, I have received this in the mail today..."

>Giles held up the book he had been reading through. It was large and the cover was strange. It was of a rough material, and it seemed to have a screaming, decayed face on the cover. Inside were pages of diagrams and incantations, all written in a red liquid that Buffy didn't want to think about. The Slayer then looked to her Watcher, whose eyes were tired and upset.

>"What is it, Giles?" She asked.

>"Quite possibly the most evil piece of literature on this earth. The Necronomicon Ex Mortis, the Book of the Dead..."

>
"We've been detected, Daddy-O" Xander said quietly as he slipped into Ash's car. He'd stayed after school to use the weight room, but it had been a useless trip, because everything had been so easy. No matter what weight he had put on, he could do it. Xander didn't know what that meant, and he had no time to figure it out because Buffy problems were more important.

>
"What do you mean, kid?" Ash asked, stepping on the gas and pulling away from the curb.

>
"I mean that today, Buffy told me all about two 'psychos' as she put it who are running around killing vampires..."

>
"Well," Ash replied, driving carefully along the road, "What's the big deal? These people are your friends, right? And they fight vampires too, right? So I don't see the problem..."

>
Xander looked to his mentor and growled under his breath. "Yeah, but I didn't want them to know about it. It's just...I can't explain it, but I don't want them to know about you, Ash..."

>
"Why?" Ash replied, his voice faking hurt, "Not good enough table manners? People don't like losing a fork to my hand?"

>
Xander laughed, realizing that his friend was just trying to calm him down. "No, it's just that if they meet you, they'll make you work to a schedule. It won't be you and me hunting vampires for fun. It'll become our 'sacred duty', and in general 'sacred duty' sucks..."

>
"Gotta agree with you there, Xand..." Ash replied, taking a turn onto Woodrow Street, "I've done sacred duty. I've been the chosen one; it blows. And if I didn't know any better, I'd say I still was. I swear, you'd think I was connected with that damn book..."

>
"Let's hope not, Ash." Xander said with a small chuckle, "I

don't think the other demons would appreciate deadites. Too much over crowding in the caves as it is..."

>
"Yeah, well, if I never see another one of those goddamned things again, it will be too soon..." the clerk replied, turning onto Wilson Street. He drove for a little longer, then stopped at the third house on the block.

>
Xander, who was engrossed by thoughts of Ash and his old problems, suddenly realized where he was.

>
"Why are we at my house?" the young man asked, his voice void of any sort of humor.

>
"Well," Ash said, turning in the seat to face his friend and partner, "I've been meaning to ask you something. I know you don't have a very good family life-"

>
Xander snorted. Ash gave him a good-natured glare, then continued.

>
"And I know that on the few nights you do go home, you hate it. So, I was wondering if you'd like to move into the apartment, like completely..."

>
Xander looked at his mentor like the man had offered him a pass to Shangri-La and then lunged across the seat to hug him.

>
Ash, who hadn't realized just how strong Xander could hug, was barely able to wheeze out "I guess that means yes..."

>
The young boy paused, then disengaged himself from the other, realizing that he had block the flow of air to the man's lungs. He looked at Ash for a moment, then said in an overjoyed voice "Yes, it does!"

>
The two looked at each other, and thought of the emotional scene of a few seconds ago; then they began to laugh. They laughed long and hard, enjoying the laughter and knowing that there would be more of it. However, it ended a few moments later.

>
"You won't say anything, will you, Ash?" Xander asked at last, a trace of a giggle still audible in his voice.

>
"I promise, not a word..." Ash said, "And you neither..."

>
"I swear it!" Xander declared.

>
They were silent for a moment, then the seriousness of their situation hit them.

>
"If I'm gonna be with you, Ash," Xander asked at last, his voice quiet and somber, "Why'd you bring me here?"

>
"To get your stuff..." Ash answered, "I even cleared all the stuff out of the trunk for you..."

>
"Okay..."

>
"Okay..."

>
"Let's go then."

>
"Yeah, Kid..."

>
The two got out of the car, making sure to be quiet. There wasn't any particular reason; it was just the sort of instance when you are quiet. They met on the sidewalk, and then began walking to the house. As they walked, Xander noticed that Ash was looking at his metal hand.

>
"What's up with the hand?" the boy asked as they got to the walkway, which was in need of some work, "Malfunctioning? Need me to look at it?"

>
"Nah... I was just wondering if that little scene in the car revoked my macho crap license or something..." Ash replied, trying to keep a straight face.

>
"Oh please..." Xander dismissed it, "Have you ever watched 'Bridges of Madison County'? No? 'Beaches'? No? Then you're fine. Besides, if that first time you let me into your apartment didn't, that sure as hell won't..."

>
Ash swung around to face his young friend, a confused look on his face. "Whadaya mean?"

>
Xander rolled his eyes with a grin. "I remember you looked at me then with this expression...it was like you'd just seen them shoot Bambi's mother or something...It was priceless!"

>
"What do you mean, me?" Ash retorted, "If anyone looked sappy, it was you. You looked like a damned kicked puppy!"

>
"Did not!"

>
"Did too!"

>
The discussion continued till they reached the door, then both fell quiet. At last, Ash stepped back once and asked Xander if he needed any help.

>
"No thanks. It's mostly clothing, and I can put that in a bag, so don't worry about it...I don't have much..."

>
"Okay, kid." Ash said, "I'll be waiting..."

>
Xander looked back at his mentor and partner, stepped into the house, and then closed the door behind him. Ash stayed at the step, still looking at his hand and thinking about the boy.

>
He hadn't been a happy man for a long time. The last time he'd been happy, he'd been with Linda, just before that horrible Trip. Then, Linda had...well, Linda was gone, and he'd been with Sheila. But that relationship hadn't been right. The two had been just too different. It was all good and well to talk of eternal love and conquering the bad guys to marry the lady, but in real life, the idea of a relationship had to include common interests. And common century. Since then, he hadn't had a serious relationship with anyone, and he'd never had many friends.

>
Then he'd transferred to Sunnydale. A nice, friendly looking little California town that in reality was steeped in demons and vampires and built over the Hellmouth. And in this crazy little paradox of a town, he had met a lonely boy who was in way over his head. And this boy, with his goofy sense of humor, his strange skills, and a bizarre mix of bravery and practicality, had somehow become his best friend and his son. Wasn't life a barrel of laughs? Now all he needed was a girl and he was set.

>
It was then that Ash realized that several minutes had passed and still no Xander. As the S-Mart clerk pulled his head from the clouds, he heard an uneven thumping noise and a then a whimper. The whimper was followed by an inebriated yell. His heart jumped to his throat. Ash knew his young friend could take care of himself in almost any other situation, but, as Ash knew from experience, personal crap can turn anyone into a victim.

>
Another whimper, this time with a frightened scream at the end of it, came through the door. Ash, without a thought in his mind other than to defend the boy, growled in anger and kicked the entrance with everything he had. Though the door was made of good oak, it nonetheless came crashing down at Ash's blow.

>
The scarred man quickly entered the home, and then looked up the stairs. There, near the stairs, he could see an extremely drunken man who was yelling and bashing a broken broom into a hunched figure in the corner. Ash knew who that person in the corner was, and it made him so mad that he snapped the doorframe he was holding onto.

>
"Get the hell away from him!" Ash shouted, the muscles in his neck straining with rage.

>
"Whu?" the drunken figure replied, turning clumsily towards Ash, "Whu the 'ell you doing here, ya bas'ard! Dis is my 'ouse an if you don leave, I'll call da polize!"

>
"Get...the...hell...away...from...him!" Ash bellowed, stomping his way to the steps.

>
"Get out!" Xander's father replied, his voice much louder, "Dis iz my goddamn 'ouse an-"
>
Ash didn't even wait for the man to finish. Instead, he ran up the stairs with incredible speed and punched the drunken bastard into the next room. Ash looked in to make sure the heartless jerk was out, and then turned to Xander.
>
His young friend was in a terrible state. There were bruises all over his body that were quickly changing color, and in a few spots, blood oozed out slowly. He was curled up into a ball, his hands around his ankles, every part of his body shaking like a scared child. Ash had seen his partner fight vampires like it was no sweat, demons like an annoyance. It was horrible to see the boy like this. And Ash knew that it wasn't the first time either...
>
"Xander?" he whispered to the beaten figure, "Are you all right?"
>
"Please don't hit me..." came a ragged murmur from within the tight ball of flesh.
>
"Xander, no one is going to hit you, I promise. It's me, Ash..."

>
When the boy made no move, Ash cursed under his breath and held a hand out. Lightly, so as not to hit any unseen injury, he touched the boy's shoulder. Xander jerked back, as if he had been struck by lightning. Then, he looked at the hand that had touched him and looked up.
>
"Ash?" he said, his voice rough and shaken.
>
"Yeah, kid, it's me..." Ash replied in a soothing tone, "Good ole' Ashley..."
>
"Ash?" He asked again, as if it couldn't be true, "Ash, where's my dad?"
>
"Not here." Ash replied roughly.
>
"How'd you know?" Xander asked, a bit more solid now.
>
"I heard the yelling and the thumping;" Ash replied, "then I came in to check and..."
>
"You saw him hitting me, right?" Xander finished bitterly, "You saw him beating the crap out of me while I cowered in the corner like a goddamned child! All that work, all those nights, and I still couldn't stand up to my father..."
>
"No..." Ash told him slowly, "I saw you victimized by a person who is supposed to take care of you. And what you did wasn't cowardly or any of that crap. The fact that you haven't committed suicide before now tells me you're a very brave young man."
>
"Bull..."
>
"I bet you would tell your friends that all those scars and bruises came from fighting vampires, didn't you?" Ash asked at last, upset at those faceless "supposed" friends who had never made an attempt to investigate.
>
Xander nodded slowly.
>
There was silence for a minute or two, and then Ash asked, "Do you have everything?"
>
"It's in that bag." Xander replied raggedly, pointing to a large duffle bag that had fallen halfway down the steps, "All of it. The only things I want from here..."
>
Ash looked at the bag, at his friend, and then finally at the door behind which Xander's father lay knocked out. He'd seen Deadites do horrible things, vampires kill people, demons wreak havoc, but as he fully soaked in the scene, he realized that human beings could be worse than any monster, and crueler than any demon.
>
Finally, he helped Xander up with a grunt, grabbed the bag, and walked out. Xander followed behind him, limping a bit, but by the time they got to the car, he seemed much better. Without a word, Ash

opened the trunk, put in the duffle bag, then closed the trunk with a crash. Xander got into the car on his side, and then promptly fell asleep. Ash got in, closed the door behind him, then drove them home.

>

>"The book of the what?" Willow asked, having heard only part of the conversation due to the fact that she had just walked in.

>"The Book of the Dead" Giles repeated, "Known by most as the Necronomicon."

>Willow just stared at the Watcher. While Willow was just a beginner witch, she knew enough about the book to know that it was very dangerous.

>"Why did you get it, Giles?" The girl asked quietly, "I mean, it's supposed to be very bad. And on the Hellmouth, who knows what-"

>"I didn't want it." Giles retorted before the young witch could finish, "I am aware of the danger. I would never seek this book on my own. However, I received it in a package the other day..."

>"Well," Buffy began, "Was there a note? A return address?"

>"No return address." The Watcher stated simply, "But there was a note. Cryptic and not all that helpful, but there was a note."

>"Lemme see it!" Buffy exclaimed. Willow nodded in excitement. Giles rubbed his temples, and then reached behind the counter to pick up a small piece of off-white paper, which had been lying there. Buffy snatched it out of his hand.

>"'Give my regards to that bastard Keeper and his little friend...'"
Buffy read aloud. No one spoke as they each worked out the words slowly in their mind, as if examining them would make them less cryptic. Finally, Buffy looked up and into the eyes of Giles and asked, "What's a Keeper?"

>Giles was startled out of thought, and then looked back at her. "A Keeper could be any number of things...However, in the context, I believe he is referring to the Keeper, or Protector, of the Necronomicon."

>"What's that?" Willow asked, as curious as the Slayer.

>"Well, the Keeper, or Protector as they are more commonly called, is a person born to protect the world from the demons that can be summoned by the Necronomicon. They are similar to Slayers, except that there can be more than one of them without one of them having to die. Usually, there are two. A Master and an Apprentice. Their other uniqueness is their connection to the book. If they are somewhere, the book usually follows and vice versa."

>"Is a Keeper evil in any way?" Buffy asked, hoping she wouldn't have to fight it.

>"No, quite the other way around. They tend to be quite good people, though there is a record of a rather bad-tempered one during the Middle Ages..."

>"Oh. So, if this guy is a good guy, why will I be needing that vigilante's help?"

>"Because...we have no idea what the Hellmouth will do to the Necronomicon!"

>"Oh"

>"And the demons which can be called by this book are far more dangerous than any vampire."

>"So why not send it away?" Willow suggested, her eyes shining with what seemed a great solution.

>"I would..." Giles said, "If I knew anyone I trusted enough to send

it to. The Council would have been my first choice, but after my breaking with them, I don't know if I can trust them."

>"So, what are you going to do, Giles?" Buffy asked, the concern overruled by the fear, "Let it sit here like a ticking time bomb?"

>"Well," Giles answered, obviously already vexed by the situation, "I have decided to find the Keeper and give the book to him. That way, he shall have the book, and we will be rid of it..."

>"How will you find him? Does he give off some kind of creepy vibes?" Buffy asked.

>"Perhaps." The librarian replied, "I'm not very sure. This book has been lost to the Watcher's Council for centuries, so all the knowledge I have is very vague. It is possible that the Keeper would come up on your, er...what do you call it?"

>"My spidy senses" The blonde Slayer replied, pointing at her head.

>"Er...yes...Your Slayer instincts."

>Potato, potaato, tomato, tomato..." put in Willow helpfully.

>"So we find this Keeper and hand the book over to him? That's it?"

>"But what if the Keeper decides to stay in Sunnydale?" Willow asked, worried about a plan that relied upon someone not of the Scooby gang.

>"Then he's crazy!" Buffy said with certainty, "Anyone who actually WANTS to stay in this nutty place has got to be bonkers!"

>"But what if he does? I-I mean, it's not easy leaving an entire life and all that, you know?" Willow argued, "And maybe he likes it here. Other than the demons, vampires, hell-beasts, ghouls and monsters, Sunnydale's not all that bad..."

>"Then we carefully ask them to leave." The Watcher replied, cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief, "I'm sure once we explain the circumstances, he would be more than happy to oblige..."

>"Let's hope so..." The Slayer sighed, "Cause I really don't want to deal with anything new...the Mayor's quite enough to handle, thank you, without some crazy book-guy..."

>The three in the library were silent for a moment, and then nodded almost in unison.

>"So, I'm guessing that you'll be looking tonight, Buffy?" The redheaded witch asked at last.

>"Yeah, pretty much..." Buffy replied, "But I figure I can patrol near the S-Mart and get in a little shopping. That way, if I don't find anything, the whole thing wouldn't have been pointless..."

>"Can I come?" asked Willow, anxious to help her friend, not to mention get a little shopping done. Willow may have been a bit of a nerd, but she still liked to spend a little.

>
It had been a long day. A very long, tiring, bothersome, tedious, ugly day. They'd started the "Thanks-for-savings" sale at the S-Mart today, and the crowds had been horrible. Ash thought of how Xander had said that Sunnydale was a really tiny town. From the attack on the store today, he was beginning to doubt that. And he didn't even want to think about the plastic turkey disaster. They still weren't sure that Tim would regain use of his arm after that, and Ash himself had lost the sleeve of his uniform, though luckily not the one that concealed his arm mechanism.
>
All in all, he was very ready to go to sleep. As he walked from the back exit of S-Mart towards his car, he began to dream of his bed. His mind went over all of its wonderful features, from the soft,

comfy pillows to the supportive, supple mattress. The scarred S-Mart employee smiled to himself as he thought of how nice it would be to just fall on it.

>
His daydreams were interrupted, however, by a small tingle at the back of his neck. He'd had a similar experience before, and the fact that that experience had involved a certain cabin in the hills of Tennessee didn't make him a happy man. But this time was different. While the tingle that informed him of a deadite's presence seemed to have a familiar and dark presence, but this was more of a pleasant bright tingle, if you could describe a tingle that way. Any other person would have dismissed it, but Ash was one paranoid S.O.B, and with good reason. So, praying to every god he knew, which was all of one, he turned around.

>
He was surprised to find the presence to be that of two girls. The first, a cute little blonde, seemed to radiate with something Ash couldn't even describe. Whatever it was, it was something different, something to be respected. The second, an obvious wallflower with red hair also gave him an odd vibe, but it was nothing close to what the blonde was giving off. He continued to stare for a moment, until the blonde turned to him.

>
Hazel eyes blazing, the petite powerhouse stared at him, baking him with her gaze. Ash just stood in shock for a moment, and then shook himself. What was going on? And who was this chick? A second later, he decided that he was too tired to investigate and turned to leave. It was a small town. He'd find them again if he needed to.

>
But as he turned, the blonde ran towards him, going faster than he'd have thought she could go. The redhead was close behind.

>
"Wait!" The blonde girl shouted, trying to catch him, "Wait! Wait up!"

>
Ash didn't wait, but he didn't speed up either. It took them a minute, but the two finally caught up with him.

>
"Hey, I asked you to wait!" Blondie told him angrily, holding by the shoulder in a surprisingly hard grip.

>
"Yeah, and?" Ash said irritably, his temper in a bad state due to his fatigue.

>
"So, it's common decency to wait when someone calls!"

>
Ash just looked at her, telling her in no uncertain terms what he thought of that, then snorted. "Look, Blondie, if you stopped me to be Miss Manners, I got better things to do, all right? I just got off work and I'm looking to head home to my bed!"

>
"You don't have to be so rude..." the redhead whispered, edging in.

>
"Yes," Ash replied angrily, "I do. I'm tired, and you are in the way of me going to my bed and getting some rest, so yes, I do have to be so rude."

>
The two girls sort of backed up at that, but the blonde obviously wanted something and wouldn't let up.

>
"Look, I don't know what your problem is, buddy, but all I want is for you to answer a question for me. Then I'll leave you alone, I promise..."

>
"What makes you think I'll answer anything?" He replied crossly, "Some little chick comes up to me, bothers the hell out of me, and then expects me to answer her damn questions? I don't think so, girly..."

>
"'Chick'?" The blonde said, outraged, "'Girly'! This is the 90's pal!"

>
"Yeah," Ash said, pulling away and beginning towards his car, "And this is me leaving..."

>
The blonde turned to her friend, nodded to herself about something, then launched herself at him. Before she was within two feet, Ash turned around and caught her foot in mid air. The girl looked down, then flipped backwards, sending her other boot into Ash's chin.

>
Ash's head snapped back, and he let go of her foot. He reeled for a moment, and then shook his head. By that time, the girl was all ready again, and she began her assault. She moved very fast, faster than anything human he had ever seen, except perhaps for Xander when Ash wanted him to clean the dishes. His mind began to scream at him that she was a vampire, but that tingle he had felt was nothing close to what a vampire felt like.

>
Arms and legs flew at him, and Ash deflected everyone. But she kept coming, and he was already tired as it was, so she got a hit in every once in a while. Eventually though, Ash figured out her pattern and was able to take the offensive. He was tired, but he was also angry, so he was able to give her quite the run for her money. But just as he thought he had her, she swung her leg underneath his legs and he went sprawling.

>
Ash got up quickly, but no quick enough to miss the kick in the face. That sent him flying again, but this time, he got up fast enough to deflect her blow and send her onto the cement. She got up, and as she did, Ash could see a stake in her hand. What the hell was she doing with-

>
"Oh shit..." Ash gasped out. This had to be Buffy, the Slayer Xander had told him so much about. Now that he thought of it, he should have figured it out right at the beginning. Guess I'm getting old, Ash thought, and then dismissed it with a mental chuckle. So, he assumed, the little redhead must be that girl, Willow. And he was in the middle of a fist-fight with Xander's two friends.

>
Buffy didn't seem realize the reason for his curse, and again attacked. She swung the stake towards his heart, and Ash jumped out of the way a second before it would have hit its mark. Sliding sideways, the scarred man grabbed the Slayer, then pinned her to the ground.

>
"Are you the illustrious Buffy I keep hearing about?" he whispered to you, making sure her boot was nowhere near a certain sensitive spot.

>
"Yeah, fang-face, that would be me..." she replied, throwing him off and standing up, "Buffy Summers, Slayer extraordinaire!"

>
"Great!" Ash replied, "So, I guess you can stop attacking me and we can go to my place and-"

>
"Ugh!" Buffy exclaimed, "Sorry, I don't do folks without souls!"

>
"But I wasn't asking you to-"

>
"But nothing!" Buffy cried, trying to slam the stake into him. Ash evaded again, but this time it was a bit harder. He was tired, and it was beginning to show. Then something exploded into his mind like a shotgun shell.

>
This was the same Buffy who had broke Xander's heart. The same Buffy that had forgotten him, and neglected him, and never asked about all the black eyes and extra bruises. The Buffy that had never remembered his friend. It seemed insignificant, but when heaped together, it was a long list of little abuses. They were things you could yell about, certainly not a reason for a fist-fight, yet Ash could feel the rage, the same one that had come over him at Xander's house, come over him then. In a second, his fatigue was gone, and he was back in the game.

>
While the thoughts had come, he had been merely block and

evading, and not doing all that good of a job. She knew he was tired, and was trying to tire him out instead of risking an all out attack again. So Buffy was completely unprepared when Ash jumped up and slammed a roundhouse into her face.

>
The Slayer went flying and only stopped when she hit the dumpster. Her head lolled to the side and her arms draped over the ground in a mess. Willow gasped, then ran over to her friend. After checking her wounds, the little witch turned to Ash with an expression of pure hatred, but Ash didn't care.

>
He didn't attack again. He just took a deep breath and made his way over to the girls. By the time he made it over, Buffy was awake, if not ready to fight for another couple minutes.

>
"You little brats!" Ash yelled, still panting from the exertion, "You Goddamned little horrors!"

>
"What are you talking about?" Buffy said, still a little woozy.

>
"You don't even know who I am, do you?" Ash continued angrily, "You just attacked me, and then when I try to explain, you didn't stop! I'm a damned human, not a vampire!"

>
"Really?" Willow asked heatedly, "Then how did you do that?"

>
"Because," Ash spat back, "I've been fighting with crap faster and stronger than me for almost five years!"

>
"Huh?" Both girls asked, obviously confused.

>
"Yeah, huh?" Ash mocked, "Don't know a damned thing and you attack me...damned brats..."

>
Both of them had the sense to look ashamed.

>
"Maybe, next time you get an odd feeling about someone, you should ask yourself-"

>
"What the hell is going on here!?!?"

>
All eyes turned to the figure that had just entered the back parking lot of the S-Mart. He held a small backpack, and what looked to be a bag of Kentucky Fried Chicken. His eyes were blazing, the anger shown not only in his face but in his rigid stance.

>
"Hey, Xander..." Willow tittered nervously.

>
"Hi."

>
"Hello, Kid..."

>
"What...the hell...is going...on!" Xander repeated. Then he looked to Ash, and asked in a more gentle tone, "You all right?"

>
Ash nodded, then indicated with a shake of the head that he had better ask the same of Buffy.

>
"You?" Xander asked.

>
"I'm fine, Xander..." Buffy said as Willow helped her to her feet, "And we just had a little...discussion."

>
"I'm guessing that the words "fist" and "face" were the most commonly used words in that discussion..." Xander said with biting sarcasm,

>"Now would someone please tell me what is going on!?"

>"I was walking to the car" Ash started, his voice perfectly pleasant, "When these two bothersome creatures began pestering me!"

>"Is that right?" the young man asked the two girls, his voice deadly quiet.

>"Yeah, I followed him. But I wasn't annoying! I just wanted him to answer a question for me!"

>"Is that so?" Xander turned to Ash.

>"Yeah..." Ash admitted, "But, you know the sale started today, and Tim had that thing with the plastic turkeys that I told you about at

lunch, and then all I wanted was to get home in bed and maybe get up later to share that lovely bucket of chicken I see you got."

>Xander seemed to think for a moment, going over each person's story. Then he turned to Willow.

>"Well, Buffy was being a bit forward..." the girl said without him even asking.

>"Willow!" Buffy muttered, casting the redheaded witch a dirty look.

>"But he was kinda rude..." she continued. Xander just looked at Ash with a raised eyebrow. His scarred friend gave him a sheepish look.

>"And then he tried to leave, so Buffy attacked him."

>"I see..." Xander said calmly, rubbing his chin, "Ash tried to leave, so you attacked him...Is that right, Buffy?"

>"Yeah...basically..." the Slayer admitted.

>"And you, being the Slayer, attacked him with all you had?"

>"Yeah, pretty much..."

>"Oh..." Xander concluded, looking her up and down in a way that had nothing to do with admiring her figure.

>"And Ash...Buffy attacked you?"

>"Yeah."

>"And you fought back?"

>"Yeah..."

>"And you eventually threw her into the dumpster?"

>"Actually, I kicked her, but pretty much, yeah..."

>Xander looked at Ash, then at Buffy. He seemed to ponder something for a moment, and then began to pace around the parking lot like some
kind of detective figuring out a crime scene. After a minute or two, he turned around and faced his three best friends.

>
"So, you're saying that my roommate and the Slayer decided to rumble because Ash wanted to go to sleep?"

>
The Slayer and the S-Mart employee looked at each other for a moment, then nodded at Xander. Suddenly, something computed in the blonde girl's head, because her expression changed from guilt to shock.

>
"Xander! How do you know this guy!?"

>
Xander looked at Ash and smiled. Ash grinned back. "As I said, he's my roommate."

>
"Your roommate?" Willow asked, completely confused, "But when did you move into a roommate situation?"

>
"Today." Xander replied, digging into the KFC basket and pulling out a drumstick, which he tossed to Ash, "Ash knew I didn't like going home, so he told me that as long as I keep the place decently clean, I can stay at his place."

>
"What do you mean, 'stay at his place'?" Willow cried, "How long have you known this guy?"

>
"A few months..." Xander answered, pulling out a piece of chicken for himself, "Besides, I was bunking at his place most of the time

>anyway, so now it's just official."

>"Bunking at his place? Moving in with him?" Buffy asked in astonishment, "Xander, why would you leave home to go with some psycho you barely know?"

>"Firstly, Ash is not a psycho," Xander said angrily, upset that Buffy would insult his mentor like that, "and if he was, it would be completely understandable considering what he's been through.

Secondly, I've known him since he moved here a few months ago, and during that time, I've spent more time with him than anywhere else. Anywhere else.
Thirdly, if you don't know why I would want to leave home, you had better ask Willow cause I sure as hell won't tell you..."

>
The tone in the parking lot changed from good-natured disagreement (which it had just barely reached) to uncomfortable anger.

>
Buffy turned to her friend, who was looking very troubled at the moment. "Willow?"

>
"I don't want to talk about it..."

>
Ash, who had been watching for the most part, couldn't take it anymore. "Well, somebody better talk about it, because I for one can't stand the fact that you didn't take the time to find out before this, when you could have helped..."

>
The remark stung Buffy, not to mention Willow. "Xander...please tell us what he's talking about..."

>
"My dad..." Xander winced as he said the hateful words.

>
There was silence in the parking lot as they waited for Xander to explain, but he didn't. Finally, when she realized that he simply couldn't, Willow spoke up.

>
"Mr. And Mrs. Harris have always had a...a problem w-with drinking..."

>
The silence came back the second that she stopped. She didn't want to be the one to tell Buffy this, and she hated thinking about it herself,

>but she knew it had to be said, and if this was what she could do to help her friend, this is what she would do for him.

>"And when Mr. Harris got drunk, sometimes h-he lost it...Like flipped out...and sometimes h-he would bring out this old br-broom and..."

>"And?"

>"And hit Xander with it..."

>The Slayer's eyes turned to her friend. She couldn't believe it. How could this have been going on all along without her knowing? Why hadn't he told her? But as the thought crossed her mind, she realized that he had. He had told her in a million little ways because he wouldn't allow himself to ask out loud for help. The sad glint in his eyes as he made non-stop jokes about his own stupidity and uselessness. The mysterious bruises and black-eyes from vampires he would describe, but she could never find. He had told her. She just hadn't listened.

>The next question in her mind was why he hadn't just asked for help upfront, but she knew the answer to that too. He didn't want to distract her. He thought so little of his own concerns and so much about hers that he didn't want to get in her way, even when he
was being put through pain because of it. So he'd created a joking mask, a smiling facade which none of them, especially she, had ever tried to look behind, while he got more damaged.

>
And then she had attacked the one person who had been willing to look behind the mask, to help him out of the living hell that was his home life. The Slayer, defender of the weak, had attacked Xander's lifeline, a good, if rude, man who, from the look in his eyes, cared for Xander like a son. Buffy looked to Willow, letting her see just what she was feeling, then got up. She felt dirty just then.

>
Willow looked back at her, realizing everything just as Buffy had. Then the two looked at Xander. In his eyes was all the raw pain he had kept from them over the years, all the horrible agony he had

hidden. And they took it. They took it because it was the least they could do for the one who had always been the shoulder to cry on but had never been offered one.

>
Finally, Xander broke the contact, and his eyes turned to something that resembled those of the old Xander.

>
"Well, guess we should just put everything behind us then, shall we? And begin introductions..." the boy said at last, putting down the KFC bag.

>
"Ashley J. Williams, meet Buffy Summers and Willow Rosenberg." Xander said, gesturing wildly, "Willow, Buffy, meet Ash..."

>
"Pleased to meet you..." Willow said quietly.

>
"Yeah..."

>
"Same here, ladies." Ash responded with a grin and a salute. The S-Mart employee then looked around for a minute. "Uh, folks? Why don't we get out of here? It's getting real dark and we all know that being out at night is bad in this little town..."

>
"Good idea..." Buffy replied, "Let's head to the library. We have a brand new problem, by the way."

>
"What is it this time?" Xander asked, groaning at the prospect of research.

>
"A book arrived in Giles' office the other day, and we need to find its owner and get it off the Hellmouth..."

>
Ash and Xander exchanged a look. They obviously wanted to ask something, but no one wanted to voice the question. Finally, Xander asked, "What's the name of the book?"

>
The two girls exchanged glances as well. Xander was usually not into books, but they might as well tell him if he was going to be researching it for the rest of the night.

>
"It's this old book with a weird cover called the Necro-something or ot-"

>
"GOD DAMN IT!" Ash shouted out, cutting her off, "NOT AGAIN! NOT AGAIN FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!"

>
"What's up with him?" Buffy asked, pointed at the distressed S-Mart employee.

>
"Remember that experience that I said would justify insanity?" Xander replied, obviously upset as well, "That was his experience with the Necronomicon..."

>
"You mean he's dealt with this thing before?" Buffy asked.

>
Xander nodded. "Plenty. Cause of that damn book, he had to kill his girlfriend, who was possessed by one of the demon's it conjured up, then he was transported into medieval Europe, had to fight an army of the demons, called Deadites... All in all, not a pleasant time."

>
"This guy's the one we were looking for!" Willow exclaimed, "He's gotta be the Keeper guy!"

>
"What?" asked Ash and Xander in a chorus.

>
"A Keeper or Protector of the Necronomicon..." Willow explained, "A person connected with the book who has the job of protecting the world from the demons it can call..."

>
"I told you I was connected with that goddamned book!" Ash shouted to Xander, "And now the fuc..."

>
Ash suddenly stopped talking and looked around. Xander glanced at his friend, then seemed to realize something and started looking around as well. Buffy and Willow followed suit, though they obviously had no idea why.

>
"What is it?" Buffy asked at last.

>
"There's a deadite here..." Ash whispered, "Somewhere here in the parking lot...in the shadows...I know it."

>
Buffy looked to Xander, who nodded at her. Somehow, he felt it too, even though she couldn't.

>
"Kid, you got anything good in that bag of yours?" Ash asked in a low voice, "Cause I don't wanna be going up against one of those damn things unarmed..."

>
"Sure, King..." Xander murmured back, pulling the bag to an accessible spot slowly and noiselessly, "What you want?"

>
"Anything with lead or a blade?"

>
"Sure..." Xander replied softly, pulling out a long knife that was almost a sword. It must have barely fit in the bag. Without a word, the young man passed it to his friend. They were both upset, Ash more than Xander, but the presence of the blade seemed to calm him to an extent.

>
"What about me?" Buffy whispered, holding her hand out for a weapon.

>
Xander shook his head, then gestured for Buffy to take Willow towards the high school and the safety of the library. Buffy was about to argue, but thought better of it, and walked over to her redheaded friend. Willow looked very scared, and definitely wanted to get out of there.

>
"Kid, you take these two to the library..." Ash told him in a sideways murmur, "You're good enough to get em' to safety...I know the way and I'll get there as soon as I can."

>
Xander nodded, then pulled another blade out of his bag.

>
"Remember, kid, trust your instincts..." Ash told him as he walked towards the girls.

>
"Okay, Ash..." Xander answered quietly, "Just make sure you make it to the library alive, okay? I don't want to have to pay your damn rent..."

>
"No problem, kid..."

>
The two shared a lopsided smile, and then Xander left his friend and joined the girls. Xander signaled the girls to follow his lead, then they ran off, leaving Ash alone in the parking lot.

>
Once they were gone, Ash looked towards a specific spot in the dark shadows.

>
"Get your sorry dead ass out here now!"

>
A second later, the possessed form of a woman he'd seen in the store that day stepped out of the shadows.

>
"We will have what is yours..." the corpse hissed, "We shall feast upon your souls and they will writhe in eternal torment..."

>
"Not here..." Ash said resolutely, "Not when I'm finally getting a life, a little happiness...Hell no."

>
"You will never defeat us..." the cadaver continued, "We will devour your soul..."

>
"Come get some..."

>

>Xander looked back into the alley as they ran, only to see his mentor conversing with a very animated carcass in cheap polyester. He didn't know what Ash was doing, but he trusted his friend. Ash obviously knew what he was doing...

>Finally, just before they hit the bend that would block the view, Xander saw the demonic corpse attack Ash. That looked about right. And from the fiendish screams, Xander knew how the fight was going. But that wasn't his main concern at the moment.

>He had to get everyone to the library. He hoped that Oz and the rest were already there, safe from the evil that he could feel in the very air. He looked towards Buffy's running form beside him, wondering why

she couldn't feel it. Surely if he, Xander Harris, normal human could feel it, the Slayer should get it on her radar. But she didn't. And that confused him.

>Xander put on another burst of speed, thought he was careful not to let Willow drop behind. To do that, he grabbed her hand and pulled her. But it still wasn't fast enough. He finally signaled to stop, then picked up the redheaded witch with ease. Then he continued to run again, now able to go as fast as he could. Buffy huffed to keep up, and that confused him as well. But he couldn't think straight, not with the back of his neck tingling like crazy.

>It took them about five minutes, but they finally made it to the library. However, just as they were about to go in, a lively cadaver jumped out. Xander immediately dropped Willow onto the grass, turned around and whacked the deadite in the face. The corpse reeled, but came back like lightning.

>Xander's training took over like never before. His hands and feet flew at the creature at impossible speeds. And it felt good. It felt like he'd been born to do this. He'd experienced something similar when fighting vampires, but it was nothing like this. This was like pure pain and pure pleasure at the same time. His mind told him he shouldn't be able to do this, but his body willingly did all asked of it. Finally, he saw a hole in the creature's defense and spun with the blade in his hand to decapitate it.

>The head bounced for a few seconds as the body toppled over, but then turned to face him. "Know that you will never regain the Necronomicon!"

>"Shut up, deadhead..." Xander replied smugly. Then he kicked the head like football, which broke it up and sent it into the darkness. As soon as he saw the head disappear, Xander turned to take Willow again, only to find Buffy and the redheaded witch staring at him.

>"Come on!" Xander shouted nervously, pointing to the library, "If we don't get in soon, others will come!"

>His two friends seemed to wake up, then nodded. Xander nodded back with a grin, then started towards the library. The girls followed.

>They entered the library, only to find exactly what they were hoping to find for a change. Oz, Cordelia, and Giles were there, looking things up. All eyes turned to them as they entered the room, and Giles walked over to them.

>"We have a problem."

>"No really!" Xander exclaimed, scratching the back of his neck.

>"The Necronomicon was stolen today."

>Xander, Buffy, and Willow all stared at the Watcher, hoping to see a crack of a smile. It was so very unlikely that he'd joke about it, but everyone needs hopes.

>"Well," Xander said, his voice trying to mask the shock and anger, "That explains the deadites..."

>"The what?" Giles asked.

>"Deadites." Buffy answered, "The demons that come from the book."

>"Oh." Giles replied intelligently, "Well that explains the reason why Oz insisted we close the doors and windows. Job well done, Oz."

>The currently redheaded werewolf nodded, then smiled at Willow. Willow smiled back.

>"Yeah, and we found the Keeper!" Buffy announced.

>Giles' eyebrows rose in surprise and joy. "Well, where is he?"

>"Right here..."

>Everyone turned to see Ash, who looked a bit dirty but perfectly healthy. In his hands were two large bundles that Xander recognized as those in which the S-Mart employee kept his best weapons.

>"Did you stop at home to pick up a little artillery, buddy?"

>Ash grinned, nodded, put down the bundles, and then ran his hand through his hair. "Of course...can't fight these bastards without a few toys, eh Kid?"

>"So you noticed the headless corpse on the front lawn?" Xander asked with a bit of pride.

>"Hard to miss..." Ash responded, "Nice job, if I may say so."

>"You're the authority..."

>The two took a moment to smile at each other and Giles took it as an opportunity to get in a few questions.

>"May I ask you name, sir?" The Brit asked, examining Ash.

>"Ashley J. Williams. But call me Ash." He said, returning the searching eye.

>"Mr. Williams, if I-"

>"Ash."

>The Watcher looked a bit flustered, but continued. "Ash, if I may ask, where did you acquire that curious appendage?"

>"Medieval Europe, if you must know." Ash said, scratching the back of his neck as Xander had, "Used to be a gauntlet."

>Giles thought this answer over for a minute, then nodded. "So I guess you are the Keeper..."

>"Sure, yeah...I'm the Keeper...If the Keeper is a guy that constantly gets his life screwed up because of that damn book, then I'm your guy!"

>"Well, I wouldn't say it quite that way, but yes, you shall be connected to the book till you die."

>"But what happens when I die?"

>"The connection will move on to another Keeper, who you should have found by then and taught. That is how your kind works. The Master finds the Apprentice and shows him how to fight the demons..."

>"Apprentice?" Xander asked, a pit forming in his stomach.

>"Yes, but the Apprentice can only be another Keeper...It's not just someone who the Keeper trains...A Keeper needs to be able to sense the demons and the book, not to mention posses awesome strength and speed..." Giles explained.

>"Oh, that's good...Very good..." Xander whispered. Then he turned to see his girlfriend, who was reading and hadn't noticed a thing, "Hey Cordy!"

>"Hi Xander..." she said, preoccupied with something else.

>"Xander walked over, then looked to see what she was reading. The large book on her knees said "Sumerian Demons and Spirits: A Spotter's Guide", however, inside of that book, he could see the smaller form of a drug store paperback which she was completely absorbed in. Xander sat down beside her, a little hurt, and pulled one of the other books from the pile. A second later, he started to read.

>Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Ash and Buffy were in the middle of a debate.

>"The Kid is not my Apprentice!" Ash whispered heatedly at the

Slayer, "He's good, but..."

>"He is, Ash, he is!" Buffy argued, "I saw him fight that thing out on the lawn. He was going so fast; I couldn't even tell what he was doing. That isn't normal, Ash, that isn't human."

>"He's just trained very well..." Ash retorted, "I should know, I trained him. And I've seen him fight. Besides..."

>"Besides what?"

>"I don't want him to live like I have to..." Ash admitted angrily, "I don't want him live in fear, waiting for that damn book to spout out something horrible and then having to go fight it, not knowing if he's going to make it through or not."

>"But, if he's already-"

>"Do you know what happened to me up at the cabin where I first encountered the book?" the scarred man asked with a strange glint in his eyes, "Do you have any idea what happened to me?"

>"No, but-"

>"I'll tell you what happened. I had a normal life, a normal job, and a wonderful girlfriend. We went up there because we were getting engaged. I wanted to marry her! I loved her! And then that damn book...took her away from me. It made her into a monster, a monster whose sole purpose was to destroy me. Do you have any idea what it does to a person to have to cut the person you love up with a chainsaw? To bury the body? To know that until you stop the evil, she'll be in eternal torment?"

>"I have an idea, yeah..." Buffy slowly responded, close to tears.

>"Then why can't you understand that I don't want Xander's life to be like that..." Ash sighed wearily, "I've only known him a few months, but he's a great kid, loyal to the end, a person who makes your life a happier one. He's like a son to me...and I don't want him to live like that...I don't ever want him to experience that."

>"I know what you mean, but he has to know..." The Slayer replied, "I know what it is like to be the Chosen One, all right? I've lived with it for years, and it sucks. But when you are Chosen, you are Chosen, and the only thing you can do is get really good at it. Leaving him blind to what he is will only shorten his life span."

>The newly realized Keeper looked at Buffy, taking in everything she had just said, realizing that she knew what she was talking about. Finally, Ash breathed out slowly and nodded. "All right..."

>"Better go now, before you lose your nerve..." the blonde Slayer told him.

>Ash nodded again, then made his way slowly over to the bookshelf where Xander was reading. As he did, Giles looked up from his book and walked over to Buffy.

>"He's not a bad guy, Giles...A little rough, but he's got a good heart..." the Slayer told her Watcher, "And I think with his help, we'll fix this..."

>
"Xander? Xander, I gotta talk to you about something..."

>
The young man looked up to see his best friend gazing down at him. Immediately, Xander's heart dropped. Ash looked so tired, so world-weary. The look in his eyes was haunted and drained, the kind of expression that tells you that it's bearer wishes he could forget a lifetime.

>
Xander, seeing the seriousness in his gaze, put down the research book he was using and stood.

>
"Sure, Ash, what is it?"

>
Ash ushered him over to one of the back shelves, where they would have a little privacy. The scarred man put his real hand on the

boy's shoulder, and Xander wasn't sure if it was to comfort him or the older man's attempt to steady himself. Ash put his head down for a moment, took a breath, then brought it up. Looking straight into Xander's eyes he told him the one thing he wished he would never had to say.

>
"You're the Apprentice..."

>
"No," Xander shook his head, "We already went over this...I'm just a normal guy."

>
"No, Xander, you're not..." Ash replied, his voice telling the young man that he wished it wasn't so, "Buffy saw you fight, and I have to agree with her. What you can do isn't human. It's the traits of a Keeper. I mean, you have all the indicators: the strength, the speed, the lasting power, the survival instinct, the ability to sense those creatures..."

>
"I-"

>
"Don't lie, kid, I know..." Ash said with a lopsided grin, "I saw you scratching your neck before. I know what it feels like. I know that itch. It's the feeling of a deadite near you, of the evil of the book. It's kind of familiar, dark and unpleasant, right?"

>
Xander nodded reluctantly.

>
There was silence for a moment as the two considered what had been said.

>
"So, I'm the Junior Chosen One..."

>
Ash smiled at Xander. It was a good sign. He knew that you needed a sense of humor for the job. In fact, Ash was pretty sure that laughing was the only thing that had kept him sane all these years. That and being very angry.

>
"Well, now that that's all done, let's get to work arming these bozos." Ash said, patting Xander on the back, "Let's hope they know which end of the gun to point..."

>
"I think Buffy will, but I'm not sure about the rest of them." Xander admitted, "We'll just need to show them. Trust me, this group's good at learning."

>
"Really?"

>
"Yeah, as I told you before, in this town, you learn or you die..."

>
"Amen to that, brother..."

>
The two of them exchanged another grin, and then walked out from behind the shelves, only to find the others waiting for them in an excited bundle.

>
"Okay, Peanut Gallery, let's hop to it..." Ash shouted, his voice friendly but serious, "Xander and I will be teaching a 5 minute course on how to use a gun without killing or maiming yourself."

>
He looked to Buffy. "You don't need this, do you?"

>
Buffy shook her head, then picked up the one-barreled gun Ash had tried to give Xander that night. She sighted it, and then lowered it. "Can I get this one?"

>
The two Keepers shared an amused glance. "Come on, Buffy, I think you'll want something a little better..."

>
"Looks fine to me." The Slayer replied, looking at the gun from all angles, "I don't like guns, but this one looks nice and simple."

>
"Yeah, whatever...take that one." Xander said tiredly. When Ash gave him a questioning glance, Xander just shrugged.

>
"You either?" Xander asked Giles.

>
"No, I've used such weapons before..." the Watcher replied, picking up one of the Winchesters.

>
"Good man..." Ash said to Giles with a grin.

>
"All right now, the rest of you..." Ash said as the Slayer walked off to do something or other, "Gather round and learn from the master..."

>

>Within ten minutes, he had the group armed and as ready as they could be. At least they wouldn't shoot themselves. Ash considered it an achievement, especially when the brunette nearly took his head off with his old Remington in the first two minutes.

>Ash had taken command, with Xander as his second. Every one of them was armed to the gills with Ash's best stuff, and they looked scary enough to make Rambo think twice. All in all, Ash had a feeling they actually had a chance against an entire city of possible deadites.

>During training, they had come up with a plan. Actually, they couldn't call it a plan. It was too simple to be a plan, but it was all they had. Xander, Buffy, Willow, and Cordelia would be part of one group, and Ash, Giles, and Oz would be the other. Xander had jokingly called one team "Team A" and the other "Team B" in a half-baked knock-off of South Park. Each group would search the town, using their Keeper's ability to sense the book, and try to get it, without dying, back to the library.

>Luckily, they did have walkie-talkies, due to the fact that S-Mart had had them on sale a month ago. But the range on them was pretty short, only a mile. So they had to rely on the power of their own team for the most part. No one liked the plan that much; it was too dangerous. But no one could think of anything better.

>So they set out a few minutes later. Ash headed south, towards the main cemetery, while Xander went north, in the direction of the Mansion and the smaller cemetery. Before they split though, Ash took his pupil to the side for a moment.

>"Trust your instincts, kid..." Ash advised him, "And kick some ass..."

>"I'll try my best..." Xander replied with a grin.

>"Don't try, kid...To quote that little green dude from those movies, 'there is no try'" his mentor told him, "You make it back here, kid, or I will find a way to bring you back and kill you again in the worst possible way..."

>"Would it include a great deal of washing dishes?" Xander asked, wincing.

>"Tons. Bundles. Bunches. Oodles. And no KFC breaks either!" Ash replied with a straight face before it cracked into a smile, "Just take care of yourself, okay, kid? If anything happened..."

>"I know, Ash. I'll be careful..." Xander replied, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder, "Now we better go before the others yell at us..."

>"Damn straight." Ash said, his macho front up and running, "Let's teach these screwheads not to invade our goddamned town!"

>"Groovy..." Xander nodded with a grin, cocking his head.

>
"All right, let's head out. I'll take the front and you two cover the rear." Xander told them, "Buffy, keep that shotgun up. The best way to live is to be ready at all times. These aren't some everyday bloodsuckers; these are deadites."

>
Buffy snorted at him, but did as he asked.

>
"Willow, I'd feel better if you had that blade in your hands. I know from experience that when you're rushing, you can get tangled in the sheath."

>
Willow did as Buffy had, obviously not liking Xander's commanding attitude, but doing as told.

>
"Cordy, could you please put the chainsaw back in the holder before you kill yourself..." he told his girlfriend. She 'humphed', then nodded.

>
"Look, I know you don't like being ordered around, but it's necessary!" The young man said, his frustration apparent, "I know you still think I am some clueless idiot, but I have been studying under Ash for the last three months, and I think I know what I'm doing. Not to mention the stuff from Halloween..."

>
The three girls were silent, and then Buffy finally said, "Okay, Xander, we understand. It's just-"

>
"Weird?" Xander said, almost hurt, "Unnatural that Xander, the Jimmy-Olsen wannabe is in charge?"

>
"No," Willow jumped in, trying to calm them, "It's just that, you're so different. We don't resent it. Goodness knows, we are happy for you, if a bit worried about the whole Keeper thing..."

>
"Look, being the Keeper just means that I'll be beating the un-living crap out of deadites instead of vampires...No big deal..."

>
"No, it is a big deal...I should know, Xander" Buffy told him, her voice sympathetic now, "You are now one of the Keepers. It's not no big deal..."

>
Xander looked at her, trying to gauge how serious the discussion was going to get, then told her "Listen, we don't have time for me to work on this crap. For right now, let's keep our guard up, stop thinking and just kill any of these bastards that are dumb enough to try and attack us, all right?"

>

>"I smell something..."

>"I know..." Ash answered quietly, looking around, "I don't know exactly where they are, but they're out there, waiting for us..."

>The three men glanced nervously around the area, then something seemed to click in Ash's head.

>"You smelled them?" He asked skeptically.

>"Yeah." Oz replied.

>When the boy offered no additional information, Ash looked to Giles, who explained with a shrug, "He's a werewolf."

>"Oh, of course he is!" Ash retorted sarcastically, "You people have everything here, don't you? Should've told me to bring a chew toy along..."

>Oz glared at him, but didn't say anything; Giles elbowed Ash.

>"I don't care if you're the bloody Christ come back to save us. If you don't stop being a colossal idiot, I will break your nose!"

>Ash frowned for a moment, then grinned back at the peeved Watcher. It had taken ten minutes of bickering and insults to do it, but finally the Brit was showing some backbone.

>"I'm sorry, all right?" Ash answered quickly, "I'm just a little touchy at the moment...If you had any idea how much I hate this damn book..."

>"Well," replied Giles, a little more calm, "That is certainly understandable..."

>Oz nodded, then smiled at the scarred Keeper, letting him know he forgave him for the chew toy comment. After a moment, they continued.

>"That reminds me..." Giles said a moment later, "Do you sense anything? Any particular change in the location of the book? Are we getting closer?"

>"It's hard to tell..." Ash replied, scanning the surrounding area, "The...evil, for lack of a better word, is all around, so finding the book is like finding a pail of smoke in the fog..."

>"What?"

>"Well, it's a little easier to find, but not much..."

>"Oh." Said Oz.

>"But I do think that that warehouse up ahead would be an excellent hide out..." Ash told them, pointing.

>Giles chuckled under his breath, and Oz cracked a small smile.

>"You wouldn't be the first to think so, Mr. Williams..." The Watcher told him, "Over the years a remarkable number of creatures have called that place home..."

>"Then I say we check it out."

>
"Xander, do you really think we should check the Mansion?" Buffy asked nervously, looking up to the building that had caused her so much pain. That's why Xander thought she was nervous, but there was another reason.

>
"Yes...I do. I told you before, I can't really pinpoint the location of the book with the...presence around. We'll practically have to trip over it."

>
"But the Mansion-"

>
"Has deadites in it, okay?" Xander said, getting irritated, "That I can tell you..."

>
"So, if there are monsters in there, why are we gonna go in?" Willow asked, fingering her sword fretfully.

>
"Because deadites don't go into groups unless they have a purpose..." Xander told her, rolling his eyes as if it were common knowledge, "And the only purpose a deadite has is to get the book, or keep the book..."

>
"And exactly how do you know so much about these things, Mr. I-just-found-out-I-was-the-Keeper?" Buffy asked accusingly, trying to pull him away from the large house.

>
"Ash told me so...well, that's not true...I just know..." Xander replied, exasperated at not being able to explain.

>
"Fine...But I don't think we should go in..." Buffy insisted.

>
"Well, I'm telling you that we are going in..." he retorted vehemently, his glare daring her to contradict him.

>
"Fine." Buffy said at last, returning the glare with interest, "Just don't be surprised if you find something you don't like in there..."

>
Xander looked at each one of the girls with him. Willow, scared but willing. Cordelia, willing but clueless. Buffy, angry at him, but on his side. "All right then. Weapons out, folks...we're going in..."

>

>"Do you really think it would be wisest to go in there?" Giles asked, looking at the Keeper.

>"Well, all I know is that there are more than a few deadites in there, and deadites only groups up when they're trying to get the book, or to keep the book."

>"How do you know that?" Giles asked.

>
Experience, uh...a feeling...a good guess..." Ash said nervously, then he got angry at his own lack of knowledge, "I just know!"

>
The Watcher and the werewolf exchanged glances. "So being the Keeper is mostly instinct?"

>
"I guess..." Ash answered, tired and unsure, "Haven't really

thought about it much...when I do...what I do, I try not to think. It would hurt too much if I thought, and besides, thinking can get you killed..."

>
The Keeper was quiet for a moment, then looked at Giles. "Why do you ask? I mean, you seem to know everything about this stuff. I just found out about it an hour ago..."

>
"Actually..." Giles admitted, "No one knows all that much about what you and the Necronomicon can do...The Watchers as a whole know very little about what you can do. The Council isn't interested in much that isn't Slayer-related. And the book was lost for centuries until I received it in the mail the other day..."

>
"Oh." Replied Ash, a little crestfallen, "Too bad."

>
"However, I believe that there are passages in the book that tell all about the Keeper. When we regain the book, I will try my hardest to get some information for you so you may better realize your potential."

>
"Just don't read anything out loud..." Ash warned, "That's how I got into this mess in the first place, remember? Promise."

>
"I swear I will not read the book out loud..." Giles replied, placing his hand on his heart.

>
"Good" Ash said; then he looked at Oz, "Do you have any idea where the entrance is?"

>
Oz nodded, then said quietly, "Follow me."

>
The two older men did as the werewolf told them, and within a few minutes, they were at the back entrance of the warehouse. Near the door was a small window, which Giles promptly peaked through.

>
"There's at least twenty in there..." he reported, "and they seem to be guarding something..."

>
"Tell me something I don't know..." Ash muttered angrily. Now was not the time to talk. It was not the time to think. It was not the time to let anything but rage through his mental passages. This was a time Ash knew well, the time to kill everything in your way.

>
"All right, we go in at the count of ten..." Ash said, readjusting the sword attachment on his arm and pulling out his trusty old Remington.

>
"What do you mean, 'we go in at the count of ten'!" Giles asked in an excited whisper, "We need a plan! You don't just-"

>
Ash's expression told the Watcher exactly what he 'just'.

>
"But that's suicide!" Giles hissed.

>
"No, trying to sneak up on these bastards is suicide." Ash answered, "You can't. Maybe me, they don't seem to be able to sense me...But anyone else, they can sense you and take you like THAT!"

>
"Take you?" asked Oz.

>
"Make you one of them..." Ash explained, "I don't know if they can get fur face here, but you, Giles..."

>
The Watcher took in what Ash was saying and his face went white.

>
"I promise..." the Keeper assured him with half a smile, "If it happens, I'll try my best just to lock you in the cellar or something..."

>
"Oh dear..."

>
"Yeah, it kinda sucks..." Ash agreed.

>
The three were silent for a moment (which wasn't much of a change for Oz), then Giles turned sharply to Ash.

>
"Is Xander aware of this fact?"

>
"Yeah, I told the kid..." Ash said, "made it real clear right from the beginning..."

>
"Thank God for that, at least..."

>
"I'll thank God..." Ash replied sourly as he checked the chambers of his gun, "When he stops making me clean up his crap..."

>
"Let's get going then, shall we?" Giles said.

>
"Sure" the Keeper replied, snapping the gun closed, "Let's go."

>
Then he kicked in the door, and the word 'chaos' gained a whole new meaning.

>

>"Damn, this place never changes..." Xander said, looking up at the Mansion that had caused so much trouble, or rather had contained beings that did.

>"Yeah..." Buffy answered nervously.

>"We better use the back entrance..." Xander thought aloud.

>"Good idea, MacGuiver..." Cordelia said tiredly, "And I was thinking of just ringing the doorbell..."

>"I don't think there is one..." Xander said, his mind occupied with something else. The tingling itch had gotten worse as they came closer, and at this point, only the willpower he had forged during training kept him from scratching the skin off the back of his neck. But now, as they approached the one door, the feeling had a tinge he couldn't truly identify. It was almost...red. Dark red, if you could describe an itch like that...He'd felt the same sort of thing before at some time, but he couldn't place it really.

>"So..." the aggravated Slayer said, tugging on his sleeve, "Let's go..."

>A second later she mumbled, "get this over with..."

>Xander heard her mutter, and wondered what it was she had said, however, he was busy with other things. Such as what that strange reddish presence was...

>"No. No, don't think." Xander mumbled to himself, letting his anger grow with each word, "Just feel. Feel angry. Those damn bastards have taken over your town...Don't think. Attack. Trust your instincts, that's what Ash said...Don't think..."

>"BASTARDS!" Xander screamed, kicking in the door in rage as he pulled the cord on his chainsaw.

>The young Keeper ran into the room, slicing at the beings before they could even think. They fell in pools of multicolored blood, all a blur to his enraged senses. Xander didn't think. He just attacked. He attacked everything that made him itch, whirling like a homicidal top. He could feel others dying as his friends plunged into the room, but they were but shadows to his own gory reality. Finally, there was only one left. The red one. The wrong one.

>The blood pounded in his ears as he brought the chainsaw up for the blow that would send the creature huddled on the floor straight to hell. But as he was bringing the blade down, something hit him in the back and sent him flying. He hit the wall a moment later, the blood there having no affect on his already destroyed clothing.

>The knock woke him up. Xander looked around, but the view was blurred. The young man shook his head, feeling the wet sticky droplets fling themselves off of him. Finally, after a moment, he saw the scene he had created.

>There were pieces of bodies all over the large stone room. Many of them were twitching, which was disturbing to say the least. He worried for a moment that the pieces might cause trouble, but then he realized that he pieces were too small for any life to be in them.

Around the dismembered parts were pools of oddly colored blood. Most of it was the familiar red, but some were bizarre greens and blues. It was a disgusting scene, one that his mind refused to attach him to. But to his horror, he could see the ragged trademarks of his chainsaw on the majority of the bodies. His mind rebelled. How could he have...

>Finally, Xander realized that he wasn't alone. Looking up from the littered floor, Xander could see Willow, who was gazing at him with eyes full of concern. Beside her was Cordy, who despite her repulsion looked very worried about him. She seemed to be ignoring the majority of the carnage in a self-protective sort of way. Vampires, he knew, were never this bad.

>Lastly, he saw Buffy. She was also covered in blood, but the look on her face was more anger than revulsion. And beside her, panting in exhaustion, pain and shock, was the one person he thought he'd never see again. Angel.

>"I seem to be saying this a lot lately," Xander said slowly, getting up from the ground "but what the hell?!"

>Willow and Cordy, who had immediately gone to Xander, turned around and saw just what Xander was staring at, then ran behind him. No one spoke for a moment, and then Willow asked, "Is he evil?"

>"No, Will, he isn't evil...But he did come back from Hell..." Buffy replied tiredly. Then the Slayer's expression turned angry and she glared at Xander, "Thanks to Xander Harris. Xander, you owe Angel an apology."

>"I don't owe him anything..." Xander replied stubbornly, " I did what had to be done..."

>Buffy looked about to punch him, but Angel held her back. That confused her, and she turned around to look at her love.

>"He did the right thing..." the vampire told her.

>"Lying was the right thing? Not telling me about the spell was the right thing?" The Slayer asked in a rage.

>"Yes..." Angel murmured back, "If he had told you that I might get my soul back, you wouldn't have fought like you did. You wouldn't have had the fury. You wouldn't have survived our battle, and then the world would have been sucked into hell. He was right."

>Buffy looked to Willow, who had come out from behind Xander. She nodded. Then she looked to Cordy, who also nodded. Finally, she looked into the eyes of Xander. And in those eyes she found his core. The Slayer looked behind everything, the joy and the pain, the friendship and the hatred, and found the core. The core within the Keeper that was stronger than anything she had ever seen. A core that could love beyond her wildest dreams, and would ruthlessly defend those it loved. He hadn't done it for some petty reason. He had done it to save the world. And she once again realized just how little she had known Alexander Harris. She lowered her eyes.

>There was silence for a moment, then Xander asked good-naturedly, "So, Deadboy? What's up?"

>Angel just stared at the transformation. He'd just seen Xander commit some of the most horrible things he'd ever seen, done things with a chainsaw that Angelus hadn't even dreamed of, and now he was back to good old goofing Xander. It was mind-boggling.

>"Well, you're obviously up from the big fiery pit, aren't you?" the young man continued, still in that cheery voice, "So how are things?"

>"Good..." Angel managed to get out from his shock, "Good."

>"That's good..." Xander replied, "You wouldn't have borrowed a book from Giles without asking, would you? And then read it aloud?"

>"No, I don't think so..." the vampire replied, rather nonplussed,
"Not that I can remember..."

>"Well, you'd remember this book. It's bound in human flesh, written
in human blood, and contains rituals for raising evil demons and
other nasty things...such as what is spattered around this
room..."

>"No, can't say I saw it..." Angel replied dryly, "And by the way,
what is going on? What are these things?"

>"Deadites..." Buffy replied before Xander could, "Demons that posses
people that can be called by the book, which has gone missing..."

>"Oh" said Angel.

>"Yeah, it kinda sucks..." Xander put in, "So, what are you doing in
the middle of a buncha deadites?"

>"They invaded my home, and set up a guard." Angel told them, "I
didn't know what was happening, or what those things were, so I hid
in the basement. I got some weapons from the basement, and I was
about to attack when the Sunnydale Chainsaw Murderer ran in..."

>Xander didn't even blink. "What were they guarding?"

>"This..." responded Willow, pulling out a wicked looking dagger. It
was old, very old, and it had detailed engraving on the hilt in the
way of bones and skulls. It looked like the kind of thing Indiana
Jones would dig up. "I took it from the altar in the middle of the
room..."

>Xander stared at the dagger in Willow's hand with something akin to
awe, but so much more than that. He felt as if that blade was his, as
if it had been born with him. Only pure willpower kept him from
grabbing the blade from Willow's hand.

>"Xander?" Buffy asked, walking over to him now that she was calmed
down a bit, "What's that thing?"

>"Candarian dagger..." Xander murmured, gleaning the knowledge from
somewhere, "My dagger. Keeper's dagger..."

>"Yours?" Willow asked, looking at it for a moment, "Then how did
they get it?"

>"Mine." The young man whispered fervently, "My dagger. My
birthright. Mine..."

>"Willow, you had better give him that thing..." Cordy cautioned.

>The redheaded witch did as the girl had said, and Xander snatched it
out of her hand. The second the blade pressed against this skin, the
young Keeper let out a sigh of pure contentment, and placed it
carefully against his chest.

>"Xander?" The Slayer asked, a bit worried at his strange love of the
weapon.

>Xander shook his head at her call, and then looked down at the
dagger. "It's mine." He told them all, his voice returned to normal,
"The dagger was meant for me. The Apprentice... There's another one
for Ash, but this one is for me..."

>"Oh." Was the general reply.

>"Yeah..." Xander went on, "I don't know exactly how, but I know this
knife can put the Necronomicon out of business, at least for a
while..."

>"The Necronomicon?" Angel asked in shock.

>"Yeah...someone stole it from Giles today, and set loose the
evil..."

>"And the Protector is?"

>"I prefer Keeper," Xander told the vampire with a smile, "but that

would be me..."

>"You?"

>"Yeah, me. But I'm the Apprentice, if you didn't hear. The Master Keeper is my best friend, Ash."

>"Oh...I, uh...noticed you looked a little bit different..."

>"Yeah, that's what a few months training will do to you..." Xander replied with a smile.

>Buffy sighed in relief. This was so much better than what she had thought would happen. She had expected an all out brawl, and the funny thing was, she wasn't sure who would have won.

>"So what now?" Buffy asked Xander.

>"Well, I say we meet up with the other group, since north turned up only the dagger..."

>"It's as good a plan as any..." Cordy said, "Not that this plan was all that great."

>Xander rolled his eyes at his girlfriend. "Thank you, oh wonderfully supportive love of my life..."

>"No problem..."

>Xander rolled his eyes once again, and then turned to Buffy, Willow, and Angel. He handed Angel the katana he had at his waist.

>"Take that. Only way to kill these bastards is dismemberment. Now let's go..."

>
"This is so gross..." Oz realized.

>
They were standing in a room full of convulsing parts, all dripping with blood, which came in several colors. The three figures standing were the ones that had heartbeats, and there were all covered in the disgusting mess as well.

>
"This is never going to come out of tweed, is it?" Giles murmured fretfully, rubbing at his jacket with an already-soaked handkerchief, "You know, you should have warned us that it was going to be a bloody mess..."

>
There was silence in the room, and then Giles looked around.

"Ash? Oh...Ash?"

>
Finally, they found him, staring at a strange device that stood on a pedestal in the middle of the room. The Watcher and the werewolf walked over to where the Keeper stood transfixed.

>
Apparently, it was a dagger, though it was one of the strangest weapons Giles had ever seen. It was made completely of bone, which was elaborately carved with bones, skulls, and other things the Watcher didn't want to think about. It didn't have so much of a blade as a point. Giles put his hand out to examine it closer, but suddenly he felt Ash's iron grip upon his wrist.

>
"Mine..." the Keeper said in a slightly obsessive voice, "My dagger. Mine."

>
"It is yours? Then how did the deadites acquire it then?"

>
"Mine. My legacy. Mine to use in the hunt and the kill..."

>
"Okay." Said Oz.

>
As the two watched, Ash picked up the strange weapon and held it to his chest, moaning softly as he fingered the blade. Then he pulled it away and stared at it for a moment.

>
"The Master Keeper's dagger. The weapon that killed Annie..."

Ash told them, "The girl whose father woke the thing up in the first place. She was saying the incantation to send the evil away, when my dismembered hand stabbed her with this."

>
"Your what?" Oz asked in disbelief.

>
"My hand, the one I cut off..." Ash said, lifting the stump with

the chainsaw on it, "It was like 'Thing' from the 'Addams Family' but really evil..."

>
"Oh." It seemed to be the comment of the day. Then again, considering all the unbelievable crap that had happened today, it was entirely understandable.

>
"Yeah..." Ash replied, "I wonder how it got here? Last I saw it, it was in Annie's back in the middle of Tennessee...unless..."

>
"Unless what?"

>
"That damned hand. It's not gone." The Keeper growled, "Giles, what were you saying about that note with the book, while we were walking here?"

>
"Um, it didn't say much. It just called you a bastard."

>
"Did the handwriting look like this?" Ash replied, pulling out his wallet and picking out a piece of paper. It was a small note from a while ago, one he had written to Xander and forgotten to put down for the boy. He'd kept it in his wallet because he kept on forgetting to throw it out.

>
"Yes, it did. The 'f' is the same one, and the handwriting is done at the same slant, and..." Giles stopped, and then looked up at Ash, "Are you trying to tell me that your evil hand is behind all of this?"

>
"Not all of it..." Ash replied, "The hand obviously sent you the note, but it can't have done it all. The hand needs a partner. It can't speak the incantations; no mouth."

>
"So we are looking for Thing's evil cousin and it's friend?" Oz asked.

>
"Pretty much..."

>
"Okay, just checking..."

>
There was silence for a moment as all three men thought about the situation. Then Ash spoke up.

>
"We had better join up with the other group, since we didn't find anything in this direction other than the dagger..."

>
"Good idea." Giles agreed, shaking his head briskly to clear it, "Let's be going..."

>

>"What the hell?" Xander and Ash exclaimed at the same time. Both of them were on the lawn of Sunnydale High School, which was just about the center of the town. They were about a block away from each other when they saw one another, both leading their own group, but as they each saw the other, they ran forward.

>"What are you doing here?" Xander asked, clapping his mentor on the shoulder in joy. Nobody was dead, except for Angel and that was a special case. Ash was okay. He was okay. It was a good thing...

>"Nothing my way..." Ash answered, then he looked beyond the young man, "And who the hell is that?"

>Everyone in Ash's little group joined him in gazing at the tall dark-haired figure that had come along with Xander's team. Ash was confused. Giles looked angry. Oz looked like Oz.

>"Um...Buffy, if I may ask..." Giles inquired as delicately as he could, "How has Angel found his way back to the...er...mortal realms?"

>"Don't know." Both the Slayer and Angel answered at once.

>"And just how long has he been back?"

>"About month or so..." Buffy admitted guiltily, not looking the Watcher in the eyes.

>Giles glared at the Slayer for a moment, then seemed to think things over. He crossed his arm, and glanced at Buffy, then Angel. The entire party watched anxiously as the Watcher thought things over. Finally, he spoke.

>"I don't like you keeping things from me, Buffy..." Giles said tiredly, "But I know that whatever you did, you did it for everyone's good. Besides, things are so hectic right now that I really don't have time to deal with this. And we can always use another hand for what is going on..."

>"So who the hell are you? And why do you feel like a vampire?" Ash asked roughly, completely oblivious to the seriousness of the scene.

>"Ash, meet Angel, our resident vamp-with-a-soul, as in 'he won't kill you'" Xander said with a flourish, "Angel, this is Ash, my best friend and my mentor...not to mention the Master Keeper."

>Angel's eyes widened at the last bit, then he held out his hand. Ash shook it with his real hand, due to the fact that his other one currently held a sword attachment. But the vampire still looked at the right member, and it unnerved him. Things were getting even wilder in the little town of Sunnydale, and Angel doubted they would get any better as long as two Keepers were there. Especially if Xander was one of them.

>"So, someone has the Necronomicon?" Angel asked, looking into Ash's eyes. It was true that he didn't like Xander, but he did want to make sure that his mentor was a decent man. What he found in Ash's chocolate brown eyes would have scared the vampire deeply if they weren't allies. This was a dangerous man; this was the sort of man who would go after you even if you jumped off a cliff. He was a good man, Angel could tell, but this Keeper could commit things even more horrendous than what had happened in the Mansion without blinking if he thought the cause just. This man, who lacked a hand and the fear that most people use as a survival mechanism, was truly what a Keeper was supposed to be, what they were made to be, and Angel found himself liking Ash immediately for it.

>"Yeah, some jerk working with my dismembered hand took the book and is now calling the demons with it..." Ash answered.

>"Your what?" Angel, Buffy, Willow, and Cordelia asked in unison.

>"My hand..." the Keeper grunted as he again showed the stump to the unbelievers, "The one I had to cut off at the cabin..."

>"Your hand?" Buffy asked skeptically.

>"Yes, my hand!" Ash fumed, "It was possessed by the evil from the book, and nearly killed me. Finally, I had to cut it off, but it still lived on, and eventually killed the girl who was helping me get rid of the evil."

>He looked around at those listening. It looked as if every one of them was trying to believe it, and failing miserably.

>"Listen," the Keeper told them, "I don't care what you-"

>"XANDER!"

>Everyone looked towards the person who had shouted out the boy's name and was currently running towards them at break-neck speed.

>"John Luches?" Willow asked in confusion. What was he doing here?

>The young man, whom the redheaded witch had correctly identified as being John from her physics class, reached them a minute later, panting and yelling.

>"Willow! Xander! Buffy!" he exclaimed, "There's these things in the school..."

>"What things?" Giles asked the frightened boy.

>"I don't know! They look really weird! All gray and green and crap!" John told them, "And the gang went weird too!"

>"What happened to Nicki and the rest?" Xander asked forcefully. They weren't really his buddies or anything, but they did share a few classes with the little group of friends and he didn't wish any of them ill, especially Nicki. She had saved him from getting detention last week.

>"They look like those things!" John cried, looking behind him as he spoke, "And they're after me!"

>The entire assembly stared at the point that John was focused on and quickly saw three deadites coming their way.

>"Here, kid..." Ash said, pulling out a shotgun from one of the many filled holders, "Take this and get home. Anything attacks you, you shoot it till you can run..."

>John took the gun and stared at it. True, he wasn't a part of the Scooby Gang, but having lived in Sunnydale for all his life, he did know a thing or two. The boy nodded.

>"Now run..." Xander told his schoolmate, "We'll take care of these bastards..."

>John nodded once more, and then ran off. The group watched until he was out of view, then turned to face the on coming demons. The three deadites stopped a few meters away from the Scooby Gang +1.

>"We will swallow your souls!" The tall gangly male one that had at one time been Chris Garaccito said.

>"You will never regain the Necronomicon!" The other exclaimed in a raspy voice that sounded like sandpaper.

>"We will-"

>"Hey, she-bitch!" Ash interrupted the vaguely female one, "Shut your undead hole and let's go!"

>The three of them screamed at once and flew at the slaying crew. The two Keepers leapt towards the angry cadavers, holding the knives they had gotten from their hunts. Ash collided with the female deadite, swinging his real hand straight into her face. The deadite jerked back at the force of the blow, but quickly recovered. Then, with lightning fast speed, she whipped her decayed arm into his side. Ash gasped in pain, but recuperated even faster than the deadite had and swept the corpse's feet out from under her with a low kick. The creature went sprawling, and Ash took that second of disadvantage to stab the dagger into the deadite.

>The creature stilled immediately, and a strange mist flowed from the creature's mouth and eyes toward the dagger, which sucked it up into itself. Ash blinked, unable to understand what exactly what had happened, but shook off the confusion and headed for the next fight.

>Meanwhile, Xander was in the middle of a battle with the creature he remembered as Chris and the other one. He swung and he kicked, not thinking in the least, barely noticing anything in the more complex processors of his mind. If he was hit, he didn't feel it, and if he knocked one of them down, he would simply attack the other one. Finally, there was a weak point in the creature's defense, and Xander stabbed the nameless one in the stomach with the dagger up to the hilt. The thing stopped moving instantly, and taking that as a sign that it was dead, Xander moved on. Now focused on Chris the deadite, Xander attacked with amazing force. The thing didn't have a chance.

>But before Xander could stab it, Ash got to the thing, killing it as

he had killed the female. The second the deadite hit the ground, Xander seemed to wake up from his berserker behavior, and he stared at Ash in puzzlement.

>"How?"

>"The daggers, kid..." Ash told him quickly, "They're the best weapons for killing these things...so that's what that dream was telling me..."

>"What?"

>"That dream?" Ash reiterated, "The one I had where my friends and I went up to the cabin?"

>"Yeah, that weird one where your sister died..."

>"I saw that dagger, the one you are holding, in my dream!" Ash exclaimed.

>"You have prophetic dreams?" Giles asked, coming alive from the shocked stillness he had taken when he saw two Keepers fighting. To be honest, it was quite a sight...

>"Guess so..." Ash replied, "I already told you, I don't know anything I didn't find out by experience..."

>"Quite...Now, don't you think we should check the high school, since that young man-"

>"John" Xander supplied.

>"John, yes..." The Watcher blustered, "Well, since he told us he saw those creatures in the school, and his friends became possessed there, perhaps the perpetrators of all this are in there..."

>"Worth checking..." Ash replied.

>"I agree." Buffy said finally.

>"Uh...yeah..." Angel murmured. He had to remember to be nicer to the young man in the future. He knew that Xander wouldn't kill him as long as he stayed good, but it was always an excellent to stay on the good side of things that can kill you.

>The Keepers shared a smile, and then led the little group towards the doors. Ash and Xander looked around the entire time, as if there was something watching them, but opened the doors nonetheless, and stepped in.

>"So, do you think they are here?" Willow asked cautiously.

>"Definitely..." Xander answered in a whisper, "I can feel it at the back of my neck..."

>"Same here..." Ash informed them all.

>"So, what do we do when we get in?" Cordelia asked, totally disliking the lack of planning in this possible assault.

>"Kick some ass..." Ash answered simply.

>Oh, great plan, S-Mart man..." Cordy murmured angrily.

>Ash whipped around and hissed, "You got anything better, Miss Prom Queen?"

>"No, but I'm not Slayer chick, or Keeper boy..." Cordelia retorted, "It's not my job!"

>"Then let me do it and stop complaining!" Ash whispered heatedly.

>"Fine, fine...get cranky...but save it for the dead things..."

>"Quite right..." Giles murmured, "Now be quiet and maybe we will have the element of surprise..."

>Everyone saw the intelligence in the idea, and they all continued quietly towards the library, where, Ash and Xander assured them, the evil was. But as they reached the wooden doors, something bad happened.

>"I wonder, milord," said a familiar voice behind the group, a voice that Ash had never thought he'd hear again, "Do you still find me

beautiful after all this time?"

>"No..." Ash whispered, pleading, "No, God, no..."

>He, along with the rest, turned around to see a dark-haired woman dressed in tight jeans and a tube top that showed off her fine figure. Her face was beautiful and fresh, but cold, and it was set in a cruel smile that had a tinge of hunger to it. No one knew who this mysterious figure could be. No one but Ash. And despite the changes in expression, time, and dress, Ash would know this creature anywhere...

>"Sheila..."

>"So you do remember me..." she replied smugly, "I wish I could say our night together was the thing that makes you recall me, but I believe it was more the circumstances than anything else..."

>Still smiling, Sheila lazily pulled herself away from the wall that she had leaned against and sauntered towards Ash. He was speechless.

>"What?" she asked demurely, running her fingers gracefully through his hair, "Surprised to see me after all that time? I don't blame you...most people don't come and see you after the first two hundred years, you know..."

>"Sheila, what are you doing here?" The Keeper finally got out.

>"Causing a little trouble, raising a little hell, summoning a few demons..." Sheila responded with another smile as the other hand caressed his face, "The norm..."

>"You mean-"

>"You know," the woman interrupted, pulling away from him ever so slightly, "Your hand is a fine little fellow...very obliging, especially in helping me find everything I needed for the great sacrifice..."

>"Sacrifice?" Ash asked in a whisper, trying to tell himself that all this was a very bad dream. This couldn't be happening. This just couldn't be happening.

>"Yes, the sacrifice of two Keepers that will give myself and one other the power of the book's evil to call at will..." Sheila explained, as if it was common knowledge, smirking slightly, "Sounds like fun, no?"

>"No, it doesn't," Xander answered, stepping up to where the two had been talking, "And I don't care who you are, chick...If you don't stop whatever you're doing, I will kick your ass all the way back to whenever you came from!"

>"Shut up, Kid..." Ash told him, the usually good-natured request sharper than the young man had ever heard it. Xander, eyes wide with shock, turned to look at his friend, only to find a face that backed up the voice. With his eyes, he pleaded to Ash, but Ash shook his head, and Xander stood down and went back to where the others stood in nonplussed distress.

>"I see you have a fine control of the child..." Sheila observed with a smirk.

>"He's not a child, Sheila..." Ash told her angrily, staring straight into her eyes, "And I don't control him; he's his own man."

>"Believe as you wish..." she answered, rolling her eyes.

>"Now, what the hell are you doing here, Sheila?" Ash asked, pushing her off of him because he was sick of her games. He had an idea, and the tingle at the back of his neck supported it, but he wanted to be sure...

>"I told you..." Sheila answered with a sneer, "But if you are

wondering how I am still up and running, I'll forgo to explanation and just show you."

>As she finished the last word, her face changed into a horrible thing. Ridges and glowing eyes. And fangs. Two large white pointy fangs.

>"A vampire..." Ash said in a tired, resigned voice.

>"Yes," the creature that had once held the soul of Sheila hissed, "I was turned shortly after you left me by this one, who is now my lover..."

>At her word, another figure emerged from the shadows. As he moved gracefully into the moonlight, they could see the thick blonde hair that covered his head. His face, they observed, was handsome, with blue eyes and what would have been a warm smile, and showed that he had been around 25 when he died. Tall, with broad shoulders and a slim waist, none needed to ask how he had gotten the fair Sheila into his clutches.

>"This is my sire, Anthony..." Sheila told them all, "And this is Ash, my illustrious hero..."

>"I am honored to meet you, Mr. Williams..." the elder vampire said with a smooth bow, "Sheila has told me ever so much about you..."

>"I'm sure..." Ash muttered angrily, "Now why are you doing this?"

>"To make you pay..." the female vampire told him, "To make you pay for leaving me, for allowing all those people to die for your stupidity...For leaving me behind...Not to mention the power it will give Anthony and myself..."

>"But why now?" Ash asked, almost pleading. It was all his fault...All his fault.

>"Because...I wanted revenge with my power," Sheila informed him, "And now you finally have something to lose..."

>As she spoke the last word, she glared directly at Xander.

>"Don't try to pretend that that boy doesn't mean the world to you...don't tell me that he isn't the only source of happiness in your entire miserable life...I won't believe you...And besides, he means so very much to someone else as well..."

>Now the vampire looked at the Slayer, staring into her eyes. Buffy just stood there, like a deer in the headlights until she regained her control and looked towards the ground.

>"Yes, the boy means much to you, Slayer..." Sheila persisted, "More than you've ever admitted...Even now, you are thinking of him...this I know. You are thinking of how you have never truly looked at him, at how you have never truly known him...yes, I know what you are thinking, girl..."

>"You can't read my mind." Buffy answered angrily.

>"No, but I can read your expression, and your scent...they tell me all I need to know."

>"Leave her alone." Came a voice from the shadow behind the group.

>Sheila and Anthony both sneered, then Anthony said, "So the rumors are true. Angelus, once the most feared creature on the Continent, is working with the Slayer...Dear me, how standards have fallen."

>"Regaining your soul wasn't your fault, you know..." Sheila continued, "But working with the Slayer? My, my...how sad..."

>"Leave them alone..." Xander said angrily. He didn't like Deadboy, but he wasn't about to let them insult them when it was his job. And he didn't even want to think about the emotions he got when they had

started on Buffy. His fingers were itching to grab one of the many stakes on his person.

>"Or what, boy?" Sheila laughed, "What will you do? Defend your precious Slayer? Kill us?"

>"Yup, that sounds about right..." Xander replied.

>"As if you could..." the female vampire snorted, "You are nothing but Ashley's plaything, his little lackey. You can't do anything...you're worthless..."

>He'd heard that phrase so many times in his life. So very many times. His father had beaten the words into his skull over the years, telling him how useless he was, how he wasn't worth the clothes on his back. That he was dumb. Stupid. Lazy. Pitiful. Worthless. It hurt so much to hear it again. The repeated use hadn't dulled the pain, but rather had made it an unhealing wound that caused him more pain each time the salt of the words was sprinkled in. He stepped back just slightly, and the two vampires laughed.

>"You see how worthless you are?" Sheila told him, "You see how cowardly you are?"

>Each word was like a blow, and he continued to step back. Then he looked at Ash. The battle-hardened Keeper gazed straight into his eyes, and told him all he needed to know. Yes, his father had called him all those things, but his father was a drunken bum. His father was nothing. In his short life, he had accomplished so many things...he had even saved the world once or twice. He wasn't worthless...he wasn't cowardly. He was a warrior who had earned every ounce of self-respect this bitch was trying to take from him with mere words. How dare she!

>He smiled back at Ash, and then winked, but he continued to back up. Ash looked at him confusedly, then nodded.

>"You're an idiot!" Sheila raged, "You don't even-"

>Xander, with a quickness that surprised all there, jumped forward without warning, a stake clutched in his hands. Before the two vampires could even attempt to defend themselves, the young Keeper plunged the wooden stake into the heart of Anthony. The blonde vampire looked up at him in shock as he realized his end.

>"Goodbye, Mr. Fancy Pants..."

>And then the vamp was dust. Sheila stood in total shock as Xander dusted himself off and put the stake back to where it had been.

>"You want some?" Xander asked with a wicked grin.

>"Bastard..." Sheila exclaimed, "You killed him!"

>"He was already dead, the kid just helped him go to sleep..." Ash told her with a smile that matched Xander's.

>"Bastards!" she cried. Then, just as it looked like she was about to attack, she jumped backwards and went flying through the library doors.

>"God damn it!" Xander cried, "Come on, guys! We gotta stop her!"

>The entire Scooby Gang followed the young man as he leapt through the doors. When they got in, they found something rather unpleasant.

>At least sixty deadites filled the library, all in different states of decay and nastiness. Sheila was on the other side of the room, and she held the book in her hands. As soon as they were all in, she turned and smiled.

>"Would you like to meet the rest of my friends?" she asked viciously.

>"Sure..." Ash replied, back to doing what he did best, "Let's

go..."

>The Slayer, the two keepers, and the vampire with a soul jumped into the fight, while Cordy, Oz, Giles, and Willow stayed near the doors taking pot shots at the deadites.

>Ash had taken out his dagger, and held it with one hand, while the other held a chainsaw. Grinning manically, the Master Keeper revved up the dirty red apparatus that he had used so many times before. The deadites around him backed away for a moment, then plunged forward as a group. Ash, moving at speeds that even the Slayer couldn't match, spun around, holding the chainsaw outward. His first spin decapitated at least three of the creatures, and took the arm off of one, while the second spin took off the heads of four more. He then lowered the chainsaw, and quickly thrust the dagger into the bodies, which quickly fell at his feet. All the deadites saw what had happened and moved backwards.

>"Come on, you bastards..." Ash grunted, breathing heavy, "Come to papa!"

>He lunged towards the undead creatures, still smiling, and found one that finally represented a challenge. The thing was fast. Before it had become a deadite, the body had most likely belonged to some sort of martial artist, because unlike the others, it knew what it was doing.

>The thing growled at him, then flung it's claws towards his face in attempt to grab him. Ash sidestepped it, then moved forward to elbow the creature in the back. It reeled for a moment, and then dived at him again, this time with a low kick. Ash jumped up to avoid it, but the creature had obviously planned on that, and the kick was soon followed by a backhand that hit its mark.

>Ash staggered a moment, and then shook it off. His smile, which had fallen at the blow, renewed itself as the S-Mart clerk kicked the creature in the groin. The deadite bent over for only a moment, but it was just enough for Ash to ram the dagger into the thing's back. Grinning, he glared at the creatures that had been watching the fight. The things looked the closest to frightened he had ever seen deadites look. He made his smile especially bright, then moved like lightning to stab another in the chest.

>"We will kill you..." he heard one hiss in the back, "We will swallow your souls!"

>"Come get some..." he said.

>And they all attacked at once.

>Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Xander was doing an equally fine job. The corpses, thinking him easy meat, had immediately attacked him in a reckless, badly planned assault. He had cut down ten of their number from the attack, and was taking down more every minute. The young Keeper was flying through the library, killing the creatures left and right. Sometimes it was with the dagger, others, he used the chainsaw, but they died nonetheless. He was running on pure instinct, working his way across the library towards Sheila, who was reciting more passages.

>Every once in a while, he regained a bit of lucidity and found the time to look around and see how the others were doing. Ash was doing fine. Xander couldn't help but see the stack of unmoving deadites that was beginning to grow around the elder Keeper. The group near the doors was doing a good job as well, keeping the deadites away and getting rid of a few. Oz and Giles, with skills that surprised Xander, were picking off the creatures all over the room, blowing their heads into small pieces, then shooting the cadavers in the torso to assure that they would cause no more trouble. Willow worked mainly on keeping the things from attacking the group, and she looked to be using an effective combination of spell-work and the

single-barrel he'd given Buffy. Cordy was helping as well by angrily beating the crap out of anything that Willow missed.

>He didn't find Buffy as easily as the others. She was near the entrance to the library, fighting back to back with Angel. His heart beat rapidly as he saw her, and nearly stopped when he glanced towards the Slayer only to find her being choked to death. Luckily, Angel pulled the creature off of her in time. Xander sighed in relief, then stabbed the creature that he was currently fighting, holding the blade in the body until it stopped moving.

>He was in the middle of the room when it began to get difficult. The deadites were getting smarter, and now they were attacking in intelligently, limiting the space so that he would not be able to use his speed as much. The various efforts of the Scooby Gang had taken a sizable chunk, nearly half of the forces were lying on the ground, twitching or lifeless, but there was still very many more and Xander could sense others coming to the library. The little group couldn't keep this up; they had to destroy the root of the problem.

>"ASH!" Xander cried over the din.

>"What, kid!?" Ash replied as he sliced through somethingsomeone.

>
"We gotta get to the book! Quit screwing around!"

>
"I'm not screwing around!" Ash countered, kicking one of them in the face, "Does this look like screwing around to you? But you're right, we all have to get to the book if we want this to stop!"

>
"Okay!" Xander shouted, "Buffy! Angel! Head for the book!"

>
There was no conversation or argument. The Slayer and the vampire did exactly as Xander said.

>
Hacking his way through, Xander met up with Buffy and Angel a minute later.

>
"Any idea of how to stop her?" Buffy asked, pushing a deadite away from her and right onto the point of Xander's dagger..

>
"Well I figure that killing her would be a good solution..." Angel observed as he cleanly sliced the head off of another.

>
"No, that won't stop the deadites..." Xander informed them, "It will just leave them without a leader, and then it would be worse. At least now, they are less intelligent because they are controlled by another. If they lost their leader, we would all be dead meat...no offense, man..."

>
"None" Angel grunted as he kicked on of the walking nightmares, "Taken."

>
"So we have to disable the book or something?" Buffy asked, punching her way through the cadavers.

>
"Yeah..." Xander replied, stabbing another one.

>
"Okay...but we need Ash. He's the one who really knows what he's doing..."

>
"ASH!!!" the young Keeper cried at the top of his lungs, "ASHLEY J. WIL-"

>
"Will you shut up, kid?" Came good-natured a voice from behind him, accompanied by a light cuff to the shoulder.

>
Xander didn't even turn around. "You know any way to put the Necronomicon out of action?"

>
"We both gotta stab it with these things..." Ash replied, pulling his dagger out and showing it to Xander, "Don't ask me how I know, I just do..."

>
"All right," Buffy said, beheading one of the creatures with the large knife/sword Xander had used earlier, "But first..."

>
"We gotta get up there...yeah, yeah...I know the damn plan..." Ash grumbled, "And we're almost there. We're three steps from the stairs, and she's at the top of the stairs."

>
Suddenly, Xander grabbed Buffy with a raffish grin. "Bunny maneuver?"

>
"Bunny maneuver..." the other Keeper agreed, putting his arms around Angel's stomach.

>
"Xander," Buffy asked in a concerned tone, although she had to admit that she was sort of enjoying his hands around her waist, "What's the Bunny manuev-ahhhh!"

>
She was cut off as the two Keepers launched themselves up into the air and towards the stairs. Buffy was positive that they were breaking every rule of physics she had slept through in class, yet somehow, it worked. Then again, the sensation she was getting from Xander's arms around her might have had something to do with it; it was slightly distracting in a pleasant sort of way. They flew over the heads of several deadites and landed on the higher level of the library, only a few feet from Sheila.

>
"Yo, she-bitch!" Ash yelled, alerting the 700-year old vampire to his presence, "Give me the damned book or I'll beat you down so bad, you'll have to look up to look down!"

>
Sheila was evil, but not stupid. She was quite aware of the fact that Ash could deliver what he was promising. So she did the only thing she could. She handed the book to him.

>
Ash took the book with trepidation, opened it, then began looking for anything useful in the book.

>
"Tell them to stop..." Xander commanded, "We know you can..."

>
Sheila said something in a foreign language, and every single one of the deadites stood still. It was very eerie, like a museum of decay.

>
"Happy?"

>
"Not yet..." Xander replied, stepping up into her face, "I won't be happy till you are so much dust on the floor like your boyfriend..."

>
Sheila looked at the young Keeper nervously. He, like his mentor, wasn't kidding. Things just weren't going her way that day.

>
"What do you have against me, eh?" The female vampire asked, her eyes turning sad, "I was just a victim...a sad, heartbroken girl who wandered into the wrong meadow..."

>
Xander wasn't buying it. "And how many people have you killed because they were 'wandering in the wrong meadow'...I'm sure you don't even remember..."

>
"Why do you hate me so?" She sounded curious.

>
"Because of what you did to him before..." Xander told her, his voice edged with malice, "And for what you tried to do to me. Now shut up before I stake you here and now..."

>
"And why have you not?"

>
"Because..." the young man told her, "He needs to do it. Now shut it..."

>
Sheila obeyed and sat down, then leaned back on the banister. He watched her for a moment, the 700-year-old thing that had once held the soul of a wonderful girl. A girl who had loved Ash very much, who could have been someone important, who could have married, raised a family, had a life. A girl who had had her future taken from her by a handsome man in the shadows, all because she had entered the wrong meadow, as she said. It was no excuse for what Sheila had become, but

it did put things in a rather different light. A far more confusing, non-black-and-white light, which he'd rather not think about but had to. And she still had to die. Sometimes, he reflected, this kind of life really sucks...

>
Xander rubbed his eyes tiredly and was about to sit down in one of the library chairs when Buffy walked over to him.

>
She didn't look very happy. Actually, she looked rather nonplussed and a little scared. Knowing that this was going to be difficult, and not wanting to have a ten minute pre-conversation babble, Xander asked, "What's on your mind?"

>
"I don't know..." the Slayer answered, "It's just that...well, I don't really know how to say this, but...I...well, I...well, recently, I have learned a lot about you..."

>
"Yes..."

>
"And, well, I've kind of realized that I...I barely knew you. What I've seen in the last few hours has shown me a lot about just who Xander Harris is, and what he's made of..."

>
"Okay." Xander sighed non-committally.

>
"And, well, now that I know more about the real Xander Harris, I...I'm beginning to realize that I...well, I like him."

>
"Ah..." Xander sighed good-naturedly, "And I thought you liked me all along...What a fool! Of course you hung out with me because you hate me! Yes! That had to be it, and I was so blind and-"

>
"Not friend like..." Buffy said with difficulty, "More-than-friend like..."

>
It is lines such as this that make cartoon characters have little explosions go off in their brains and jump around like nutcases, and while Xander didn't do anything as crazy as that, in his mind, he was doing flips.

>
"More-than-friends?" Xander asked, praying that he had heard right, "But what about..."

>
"It can't work." Buffy informed him, "We can't...we know what can happen now, and we just can't risk it...besides, being in hell has changed Angel...he's not exactly who I knew before..."

>
"Not quite as jovial?" Xander asked with a rakish grin.

>
Buffy laughed, and he liked the sound of it. He hadn't heard for so long. "No, not quite as jovial...but something else too..."

>
"You two are no longer what you were..." the young man stated in a more sober tone, "And you don't want-"

>
"I don't want to have a shadow of what I had...I want something new, something I can have completely..."

>
"I am at your service, ma'am..." Xander replied, his smile renewed, as he made a mocking salute. Then his face fell. "But what about..."

>
"Me?" asked a voice from behind them. Both turned to see the brunette May Queen, who stood covered in blood, but otherwise perfect.

>
"Cordelia, I-"

>
"It's all right, Xander..." Cordy assured him, "I knew all along that we weren't meant to be...I knew. And I know you will always love me, just like I love you...like a brother. A friend."

>
"This has got to be the first time in history a man was glad his girlfriend just wanted to be 'friends'" Xander joked, "Thank you, Cordelia..."

>
"No problem, Xander..." she answered with a smile, "Just as long

as it is understood by you, me, and the entire school that I dumped YOU..."

>
Xander nodded, then went over and hugged Cordelia.

>
"You really aren't all that bad, are you?" he whispered into her ear.

>
"And you really aren't all that annoying..." Cordy murmured back.

>
Then the two split, and Cordelia wandered off to clean up. Xander returned to where he had been talking to Buffy and watching Sheila.

>
"As you were saying?" Xander urged.

>
"Anyway, I was just wondering if you would like to take me out to the Bronze after this...you know, just you and me?"

>
"Sure, Buffy," he answered with a smile, "Sure..."

>
The two shared a warm smile, and they pulled close to one another. Both could feel the attraction, and both wanted to try a kiss. Just one. It would have been so perfect; it would have been so sweet, so pure. It would have been so romantic (other than the body parts scattered around the room and the large amount of multicolored liquid on both parties). But just as their lips were about to touch...

>
"Xander! Could you two lovebirds wait a minute? I need you, kid..."

>
Xander, a disgusted expression on his face, turned to see Giles and his mentor studying the Necronomicon. Ash held his dagger in one hand, the book in the other, and Giles was pointing to some passage while muttering something or other to Ash. Xander felt like hitting something, then looked around and decided he had done quite enough.

>
"Hold that thought..." Xander told the Slayer as he saw the disappointed look on her face.

>
"What is so damned important!"

>
"Getting rid of this book," Ash growled back, "putting it out of action. I'd call that pretty damned important."

>
"Sorry, thinking with organs that are not the brain can have bad side affects..." Xander replied with a small chuckle.

>
"Tell me about it..." the scarred Keeper muttered as he shot a glare at Sheila, who was sitting on the floor where Xander had left her to Buffy's care.

>
"So, what's up?" Xander picked up, walking over to the two with the book and peering in, "We stab it, it...dies or something, then we all go home and relax."

>
"It's not quite that simple, Xander..." the Watcher replied, rubbing his temple with one finger, "Mr. Williams is correct in that you both must stab the Keeper's daggers into the book to take away it's evil power for a time, however, we are unclear as to how..."

>
"Um, stick it into the cover?" The young man replied with a shrug, "I don't know..."

>
"I was referring to the order and way of it. The book is unclear, at least as far as I can understand ancient Candarian, as to whether the Keepers are to pierce the book simultaneously or one at a time. And an error could send the even more trouble our way..."

>
"Oh."

>
"Sucks, don't it?" Ash said with a half-smile.

>
Xander nodded, again peered into the book, and then pulled back quickly. "Damn, but that thing is evil. My neck feels like it's about to crawl off me..."

>
"Try holding it." Ash told him, "It's not a pleasant experience,

I'll tell you that..."

>
"So what are we going to do?" Xander inquired.

>
"We're going to do something very stupid, but necessary..."

Giles answered, "We're going to ask Sheila."

>
"Her?" Xander exclaimed, pointing at the sitting vampire, "She tried to kill us! I don't think that she's gonna want to cooperate with anything we do!"

>
"Yes, but she has studied the book for a while..." the Watcher countered, "you don't get pronunciation like hers when you are a beginner, especially with Candarian. It's a difficult language."

>
"But how will we know which to do!?" asked Xander in something related to a shout, "It's like that lying gatekeeper thing...you can't tell if she's gonna lie or tell the truth!"

>
"I don't like it either, kid..." Ash agreed, "But me and the Brit can't think of anything else."

>
"Great..." the young Keeper replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "We're trusting the fate of the world in the hands of a vengeful psychotic vampire bitch who wants to kill us both and take the power of the book to rule in an empire of darkness...just wonderful..."

>
"You got a better idea?" Ash growled. He didn't really mean to, though. He even more doubtful of the plan than Xander, truth be told, but he truly couldn't find another way.

>
"Not really..." Xander admitted, "But just 'cause I can't think of one doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

>
"Well, whoever thought of a better solution isn't here right now, and we need to do this now..." Ash grumbled, "Now, go over to Sheila, and ask her politely..."

>
Xander's eyebrow rose. "Politely?"

>
"Well, I'm not saying that being polite will help..." Ash confessed, "But it can't hurt..."

>
"Whatever..." the young man sighed.

>
"Please Xander?" Giles pleaded, "She seems to find you fascinating..."

>
"Fine." Xander said stoically. The young Keeper looked into the eyes of the two older men, then shrugged and walked over to Sheila. When he got there, he nodded to Buffy, who promptly walked off in a huff. The vampire must have been bad company, said something or other, if she bothered the Slayer...

>
"Sheila," he began, "against my better judgement, I would like to know, and I ask in the nicest way I can muster, if you would be willing to tell us just how we can disable the Necronomicon..."

>
The female vampire looked up from her seat on the floor and stared the young man straight in the eyes, trying to ascertain just how serious the request was. The answer she got sent her giggling uncontrollably.

>
"Tell me," the vampire got out through her chuckling, "Just who came up with this wonderful plan? Cause I will bet you a grand it was Ash..."

>
"I don't have that kind of money..." Xander responded, "But you were only partially correct. Giles helped formulate this ingenious arrangement as well..."

>
"Then perhaps I shall give you half and you give me half, eh?" Sheila laughed.

>
Xander worked that out in his head, then smiled at the vampire, "Funny..."

>
"Yes, I am comedic, no?"

>
"Whatever..."

>
There was silence for a moment, and then Sheila asked, "So you want me to help you destroy the revenge I have worked on for 5 years?"

>
"Yeah, basically..."

>
Sheila just snorted.

>
Xander had to agree that it was pretty ridiculous, but he was also curious about something.

>
"You've been planning this for that long?" the young man asked.

>
"Yes..." Sheila answered, "I needed to wait for the right time, not to mention learn the book and find the Keepers. Ash, with his usual luck, found you for me, and delivered me the perfect revenge."

>
"Why do you want to hurt him so much?"

>
Sheila's eyes widened in surprise. She'd thought the young man was more interested in seeing her staked than hearing her side. This could work to her advantage. She just needed a bit of a plan. Something caught her eye.

>
"I told you..." she spat out angrily, arching her back in an odd way, "Because he killed so many with his foolishness and because he left me."

>
"And for this you wait 700 years and plan revenge?" Xander asked skeptically, "Why didn't you, like, move on or something...I mean, you had Anthony, at least until I staked him...why not be happy, or whatever passes for happy with a demon, with him?"

>
"Because he had left me!" Sheila said heatedly, twisting her hand to stretch for what she needed. Just a little farther... "He told me of all the wonders of his time, all the contraptions available. He told me of a new world from which he was from, and all the things he had, all the progress humanity had made, and then he left me behind!"

>
Xander didn't want to, but he could see where she was coming from. But that was the excuse of the person this demon had once been. Not the actual demon. She was trying to trick him, and he knew it, but he figured that he might get more information from her by pretending to be duped. He wondered what was causing her back pain...she kept stretching her arms and back.

>
"Really?" he asked with a sympathetic note in his tone, which then turned hard, "and just how many people were 'left behind' because you killed their families?"

>
"Well, I told you I was angry, not fair..." Sheila replied with a shrug, "I'm a demon, remember?"

>
Xander smiled at the vampire. "Yeah, I kinda figured the fiend would show soon. You were getting awful pitiful..."

>
"Saw through me quickly, eh?" Sheila asked with an odd smile.

>
"Yeah, pretty quick..." the young Keeper replied with a shrug and a smirk.

>
Then he saw the gun she had picked up while he was talking. The single barrel that Oz had so conveniently placed on the shelf below when the battle had been stopped, or rather, paused, now that he thought about it. Shit.

>
"But you missed this, didn't you?" the vampire asked with a smile. Then her grin disappeared, and her face turned hard. The gun was pointed at him steadily. "Now...you and I are going to have a little chat with our favorite superhero, all right?"

>
Xander did what he could. He nodded. He knew he was fast, but...

>
Shit. Shit, shit, shit...

>
Sheila, having observed the battles between the deadites and the

young Keeper, carefully turned him around, all the while keeping the barrel of the shotgun at his neck. She knew how fast he could move, and she wasn't about to lose it all because she underestimated the little bastard.

>
It took a moment (and an elbow from Willow into Cordy), but then the room went quiet. Ash, who was still looking through the book with Giles, noticed the abnormal silence, and quickly looked up to find Xander held captive.

>
"You bitch..." he muttered beneath his breath, glaring at the female vampire, "You goddamned bitch..."

>
"You truly thought I would give up my revenge?" Sheila asked with a cruel grin as she pushed the shotgun into the boy's neck roughly, "My work? The power?"

>
Ash's eyes widened, then he looked to Xander. The boy was afraid, and with good reason, but he was covering it well. Even Ash could barely see the tremors that ran through his body, and only because he was looking. The scarred Keeper scanned all over the young man to see if he was all right otherwise, but he got the most information from the younger Keeper's eyes. Xander's eyes were unnaturally calm and collected, as if the boy had gone into shock. Ash got worried for a moment, but then Xander winked at him. Ash smiled in relief, but his face dropped immediately as he remembered the situation.

>
"Let him go, Sheila..." he told her, "It's me you want..."

>
The entire group watched in silence as the vampire seemed to consider it. "No." she said at last with a giggle, "I don't think so...And I need you both for the sacrifice..."

>
"That you won't get..." Ash replied with a growl, "You may be holding the kid, but if he dies, you're going down before you have a chance to reload."

>
"Ah, you see, that is the problem..." Sheila retorted, "I have said the entire spell, and all that is left is to kill the two of you, but I can't do it with this piece of metal and wood..."

>
"Then you're screwed!"

>
"But" Sheila continued with a snarl, "If you try anything, I will forget the sacrifice, and just get my revenge for now by killing him before your eyes..."

>
"You wouldn't..." Ash growled.

>
"Yes, I would!" The female vampire replied, "There will be other Keepers for me to complete the sacrifice with...but never another you to hate, so give me your dagger now..."

>
"Why would I do that? And what do you need mine for? The kid has his own!"

>
"She needs yours to kill him..." Giles told them all, glaring at Sheila, "And she will use his to kill you, as the ritual dictates..."

>
Ash, who had turned to look at Giles, spun back around to glance at Sheila. From the look on her face, he could tell Giles was right.

>
"So what exactly are my choices?" Ash asked her with a sneer, "Have him die by shotgun blast, or let us both die by the daggers and you get the power of the book? I think the answer is obvious..."

>
"A shotgun shell to the brain?" Sheila inquired with a laugh, "You think I have lived all this time and not dabbled a bit with certain...trades? If you don't give me what I want, I will take the boy away and torture him until you agree..."

>
Ash's eyes widened again, and the sneer was wiped from his face.

>
"And I do so love torture..." Sheila continued, reaching a hand out to stroke Xander's face, which remained immobile, "Thinking about tormenting this little man here is making me almost wish that you would refuse for a while...I could do so many pleasurable things with this one, since he has such supernatural...stamina."

>
She smiled suggestively, and then moved her hand from his face to his behind.

>
"You bitch!" Ash and Buffy both exclaimed. She wouldn't...she wouldn't...

>
"I would..." Sheila answered the unspoken statement, "With great enjoyment...for both parties involved. Or maybe just me...after one of those sessions, I usually can't ask about my performance..."

>
"You horrible, slutty, undead, psychotic, evil bitch!" Ash screamed

>
"Thank you." The female vampire said with another smile, "Now give me the dagger."

>
Ash looked at the others, whose faces were blank, then he looked at Xander. His eyes were still vacant, but his body was now still. But it was a frightening stillness, an unnatural immobility that made the boy look like a statue. Ash didn't know what he was doing, or why he was like that, but he did know the kid was cooking something up, and that gave him hope.

>
The Master Keeper pulled out the dagger, and he could swear that he saw the boy wink at him. Obviously, Xander wanted Ash to give her the dagger for some reason or another, and since he didn't know what else to do, he figured he might as well go along with the kid's plan.

>
Sheila, unknowing of Xander's actions, smiled as the last bone ridge left his sheath, then held out her hand. Ash, looking around, saw that the rest of the group was aware of what was going on, that Xander was planning something, even if they were as clueless as he was when it came to knowing what the plan was. He began the walk over to Sheila to hand it over.

>
The vampire's eyes were almost hungry as she watched the dagger in Ash's hand. Finally, when he was about three feet away, he held the dagger up and away from him towards Sheila's waiting hand. He continued forward, waiting for Xander to do whatever he was going to do. A second later, as he got into Sheila's reach, he saw.

>
Xander, moving faster than thought, ducked down and pulled away from Sheila, then he jumped back up to grab the dagger. The vampire, moving far too slow, pulled the trigger, but by that time, it was far too late. Xander was already beside her, and a quick kick knocked the now-empty gun from her hands. Still going faster than Ash had thought even he was possible of going, Xander whipped behind the vampire, and pulled her arms behind her, holding them back with one arm. The other arm held the dagger at her throat. It was over in less than a second.

>
Ash, the whites showing around his eyes in shock, stared at Sheila, then at Xander, who was holding the female vampire better than shackles could.

>
"Kid?" Ash asked his friend, still amazed at the speed his young apprentice had shown.

>
"Don't ask me how, Ash, I really don't know..." Xander replied to the unasked question. Then he grinned, "But it worked, didn't it?"

>
"Yeah, kid...you did good..." Ash answered slowly. Then his gaze turned to Sheila, who was kicking and flailing to no avail.

>
"Give me a stake, Buffy?" the older Keeper asked, never turning his hateful eyes off of the struggling vampire.
>
"You bastard! It's your fault I'm like this!" Sheila screamed, straining to get out of Xander's grasp, "It's your fault!"

>
"Buffy?" Ash asked in a hard voice, "Could you hurry it up with that stake?"

>
"Sure, Ash..." Buffy replied dumbly, pulling one from her pocket, "Here's one of my favorites...Mr.Pointy. Stake her for both of us, will you?"

>
"Sure. Thank you, Buffy..." Ash replied, holding out his hand for the piece of wood. The Slayer dropped it in his hand with a satisfying slap.

>
"This is all your fault!" Sheila continued, still struggling, "If you hadn't left me! If you hadn't-"

>
Xander dropped the dagger and clapped his hand over her mouth. "Shut the hell up."

>
Sheila kicked and screamed from behind the hand, and then her face morphed. She bit into his hand, but instead of the usual cursing and removal of the hand, Xander just left it there. The bite didn't faze him at all.

>
Ash, who had observed all this, was a little worried about what Xander was doing, but shook it off and focused on Sheila.

>
"You tried to destroy the first happiness I found in my entire life since Linda...you tried to kill my best friend...you brought that damned book back into my life!"

>
Sheila's eyes widened at the rage in his face.

>
"Now you're going down!"

>
Xander took his hand from her mouth, and Ash plunged the stake into her heart. She screamed wordlessly, then just as she was about to become dust, a foreign word escaped her lips. A second later, her remains hit the floor. Not that anyone noticed.

>
They were worried about the twenty or so deadites that had come back to life and were attacking them.

>
The creatures, having lost their controller, were now much more lucid, and as a result of that, a whole lot deadlier. The first action they made, in fact, was to jump, as a group, between the mortals (and one immortal) and the book.

>
"You will never win!" screeched one.

>
"Join us!" screamed another.

>
"Dead by-"

>
"Will you all just shut the hell up?" Ash asked angrily as he reloaded his shotgun, "I'll pay to get you a goddamned scriptwriter if you'll just say something different! I've heard this before..."

>
The deadites, obviously enraged by the Keeper's words, shrieked in unison and flew towards the little band with claws bared.

>
Giles, Oz, Willow, and Cordelia, being the members without superhuman strength, fell back and leapt behind the library desk. On the way, Oz grabbed his shotgun, and reloaded it just before he jumped over to join the others. The little group scrambled for a moment, trying to set up and recover from the fall, then finally set up in the same positions they had been in before, slightly reworked due to the desk in the way. It was effective, but not as helpful, due to the deadites' greater speed. However, the two shooters, Oz and Giles, quickly corrected that.

>
Oz took a minute to readjust, but then he found the rhythm of the deadites' movements. Despite being freed, they seemed to work as

a team still, and so had a strange synchronicity that the werewolf and the Watcher could use to aim better. Giles took less time, being more experienced at using a firearm, and helped out those in the field.

>
As for that group, they weren't doing so well. Buffy and Angel had been barely holding their own in the previous battle, but now, with the deadites' being faster and more intelligent, they were getting more hits than they were giving. Angel was already bleeding from three gashes at his back, left arm and right leg, while Buffy tried to fight despite the slash in her shoulder, which was obviously causing her pain. Neither of their special healing abilities were keeping up with their wounds, and it was costing them every minute they fought.

>
As for the two Keepers, they were fighting for their lives. Before, the deadites had been more like zombies, but now they were the full-blown nightmares that Ash had faced in the cabin so long ago. Thinking, kicking, screaming, scheming, vicious bastards. Yet they were still making progress, as a team. There were only six deadites left.

>
"We gotta get back to the book and stab it!" Ash cried over the din.

>
"Yeah," Xander replied, kicking one of the creatures in the gut, "Head" kick, "for" punch, block, "me!" stab, miss, block, "I'm clos-" kick, jump, "closest!"

>
"Okay!" Ash answered through the chaos, looking to the stairs, then ducking to avoid a rather nasty set of claws, "Get the" punch, kick, swipe, "Slayer and" hit, block, oh that hurt, "the vamp!"

>
"Buffy!" the young Keeper's voice rang out as he stabbed the creature he was fighting, "Angel! To the book again!"

>
The Slayer and the vampire nodded as soon as they could, then kicked their respective deadites away from them to make a run for it. They were almost to Ash when another of the creatures jumped out from behind the library desk. It was once Willow.

>
"You cannot win!" the deadite that had at one time been Willow Rosenberg announced in a voice that sounded deader than the rest, "Join us or die! We shall bring the evil to all the world with the power of the Hellmouth!"

>
"Willow!" Buffy cried. She was between the Slayer and the book, but Buffy just couldn't hurt her friend. If she killed the deadite Willow, the true Willow would die. She just couldn't do it! She couldn't fight her friend! So Angel did it for her, grabbing the demonic redhead and throwing her into the library cage.

>
"Angel!" Buffy screamed.

>
"Not now, Buffy..." Angel muttered back, "We gotta get to the book!"

>
Buffy knew that now was not the time to argue, and so followed the vampire as he ran towards the stairs. Suddenly, he halted. Buffy turned to see the demonic Willow grasping the neck of Angel's shirt.

>
"Willow! No!"

>
This caught Xander's attention. The idea that anything should happen to his good friend Willow was not acceptable. He turned, and the sight he found shocked him to the core. She was one of them. And he knew that Buffy wouldn't be able to survive a fight with something that had once been her best friend. Xander wasn't sure he could either, but he would do anything to save Buffy.

>
The young Keeper turned to Ash, who was right beside him. Ash looked to where Xander had, then nodded. He understood.

>
"Get to the stairs, Ash!" Xander told his comrade, "I'll get back, and then we'll get rid of these bastards!"
>
Ash nodded again, then headed for the stairs. Suddenly, the sound of glass breaking alerted everyone to the fact that reinforcements had arrived for the deadite team. Oh shit.

>
Xander glanced back at the creatures flooding in, then reached down into himself, where he had gone to when he'd been held hostage. Then, using a power he didn't understand, he leapt into the middle of the battle between his best friend for life and his lady love.

>
"Get off of her, you bitch!" Xander cried, facing the evil version of the girl he'd grown up with.
>
"This is the night you shall die, Keeper..." the deadite answered with a disgusting smile.
>
"Not tonight, bitch, not tonight!"
>
And he flew at her. But as he did, her face changed into that of the old Willow, the one he knew and loved like a sister.

>
"Please, Xander...you told me you'd always protect me!" She informed him, her eyes sad and filled with tears, "Remember the time that I scraped my knee on your skateboard and you-"
>
"I nothing!" the young Keeper responded angrily, "You're not Willow, and I'm going to kick your ass!"
>
The creature's face changed back to it's horrible true appearance, then it lunged at him. Xander jumped over its lunge, and then grabbed it by the shoulders. Using the momentum of the lunge, the Keeper flipped the deadite onto the ground, and then leapt back. The thing that had once been Willow got up shakily, then tried to attack him once more. Xander again leapt, and gave her a roundhouse kick to the face, sending her flying once more into the library cage. Then, using a speed he had never had before, he ran over and locked the cage up.
>
"Gotta go!" he cried to the Slayer and the vampire who watched in awe.
>
Xander again reached inside himself, and jumped towards the stairs, landing just a foot from the first step. He kicked the deadite in his way out of it, and stabbed it as it fell, then moved on. A chop, a kick, a punch, a stab, and he was up the stairs and beside Ash.
>
"What do we do?" Xander asked, kicking another of the creatures away from them, "One at a time, or both?"
>
"I don't know!" Ash replied, highly frustrated. He took that out on the next deadite that tried to attack them, leaving only a few pieces of flesh and a big mess on the carpet.
>
"Well, we've got to do something!"
>
"Kill them all?" Ash asked.
>
"That won't work." The young Keeper told him, "We'd have to fight a town's worth of deadites, and I'm getting tired!"

>
"Then we have to do one or the other!" Ash yelled over the noise as he sliced the head off of one of the things.
>
"Both!" Xander decided, pulling out his dagger, "It's worth a shot!"
>
"Fine!" the elder Keeper answered, doing the same, "One, two, three!"
>
At the count, the two plunged their daggers into the eyes of the book. The book screamed, then stiffened. A second later, every deadite in the room dropped to the floor.
>
Ash and Xander looked around and sighed, happy at the outcome.

Then they heard a strange sucking noise, and turned around.

>
Beneath the book was a small vortex. Ash, having gone through one of those, was already familiar with its effects, and didn't like that idea one bit. Giles had to study that thing! And he had to have it to keep it out of the wrong hands!

>
Ash made a grab for it, but just as his hand touched it, the book went into the vortex.

>
"Goddamn it!" he cried.

>
Xander's eyes widened in shock, but he was too worried to stay occupied about the book. From behind the counter, he saw Giles, Oz, and Cordy emerge, a bit dirty and tired, but alive. And Buffy and Angel looked okay, if a bit worn-out and bloody. Willow, looking normal, was shaking her head in the library cage, no longer possessed. All seemed about to drop, when suddenly the library door opened.

>
Everyone in the room grabbed their weapon, and turned to face the enemy, but they were disappointed.

>
"Hey, B!" Cried a brunette Ash didn't know, "What's-"

>
She saw the mess, and then looked to Buffy. Buffy shrugged. Her eyes turned to Giles, who also shrugged, then to Oz, who did the same. Cordy merely shook her head. Then her eyes went to Willow in the cage, whose response was an un-Willowish curse and a shake of the head. Finally, the girl's gaze settled on Xander, who was covered in goo, still holding his dagger, and looking like he was about to kill something.

>
"All right!" Faith yelled, "What the hell happened? Why is Willow in a cage? Who are all these people on the floor?" Then she pointed to Ash and Angel, "Who are those two? Why did no one invite me to the party?"

>
Then as an afterthought, she added, "And why is Xander wearing so many weapons?"

>
The entire group stared at her, but none so hard as Xander. His gaze focused on the dark-haired Slayer, then he did something totally unexpected.

>
"And what" Faith asked, pointing at Xander, who was rolling on the floor laughing, "is so damned funny?"

>
Before any of them could answer, the young Keeper recovered from his bout of giggles and walked over to the nonplussed Slayer.

>
"Come here, Faith..." he said, pulling her gently towards the bookshelves, "I'll explain the whole thing to you if you just give me a minute..."

>
"All right..." Faith answered warily, going with him, "Just don't get any of that goo on me, okay?"

>
"Okay..." Xander replied, holding his two dirty fingers up, "Scout's honor."

>
"You were a scout? Oh my god!"

>
Meanwhile, Ash was in a bit of a bad mood. He'd lost the book, and now he'd never be able to find out what was up with him and the kid. Also, Giles had seemed really excited to study it.

>
"Uh, Mr. Williams," the Watcher began, "I was just wonder as to where you put the Necro-"

>
"I lost it."

>
Giles' eyes opened wide, and he asked, "How could you lose it! It's a large book bound in human flesh! Very hard to misplace!"

>
"Well," Ash replied, staring as intently at the floor as he would have if the latest edition of Playboy had been on it, "We had to stop the fighting, and we didn't know which to do, and Xander

said-

>
"You guessed, didn't you?" The librarian asked tiredly.

>
"Yeah, we guessed." The Keeper admitted, not raising his eyes just yet, "We both stabbed the thing at the same time, and the deadites dropped. Then it got sucked into a vortex."

>
"Exactly what I was afraid of..." Giles replied, taking off his glasses. He attempted to clean them, then realized that his shirt was sopping wet with liquids he'd rather not ponder. He put them back on. "Now the book will be rocketing around time and space!"

>
"So, if it's not here to cause trouble..."

>
"No, it may bounce around for a while, but it will return to our time, and most likely in this hemisphere."

>
"Why?"

>
"Evil detests crossing large bodies of water, so it will most likely stay here, on this continent. It should land within a few months, and then you will have to go and get it."

>
"More work!?" Ash whispered heatedly, his eyes flying up to meet the Watcher's, "You've got to be frickin' kidding me!"

>
"No, I'm afraid not." Giles informed him, "And Xander will have to go with you..."

>
"Why's that? The kid should finish school, and go to college and all that jazz. I don't want him ending up like me!"

>
"Ash, I do not know if you are aware of this, but Xander's grades are rather low. And he doesn't intend to go to college..."

>
"Doesn't intend to go to college my ass!" Ash replied angrily, "I'm gonna give that kid a speaking to, and by the end of this year, his grades will be so high that he'll be giving that Willow-girl a run for her money! He's smart!"

>
"Yes, but rather lazy in the world of academics..."

>
"Not anymore." Ash decreed, "Now, what about the book?"

>
"You can get the book over the summer...it should have landed by then, and you will need his help."

>
"Why?" the Keeper asked.

>
"Well, you see, while we were in battle, I was thinking-

>
"Kudos for you..."

>
Giles shot him a glare. "Anyway, as I was saying. I was thinking about how Xander was able to do what he did, and how you seemed to display a great deal more power and speed in your recent exploits than in those you told me about-"

>
"Yeah, so I trained a little bit in between...I have every right to be paranoid."

>
"Yes, but I have come to the conclusion that the two of you have been using the power from the Hellmouth in order to do all you have done, just as the book used the Hellmouth to possess the great number of people it did, when otherwise it wouldn't have been able to do so."

>
"Nah" Ash replied, "The first part fits, but the second doesn't. When I was in the Middle Ages, a whole army of deadites attacked us..."

>
"But were they like this? Living beings possessed?"

>
"No, they were dead and bones, not as hard to- oh."

>
"Precisely. The book fed off the Hellmouth to do as it did, and the Keepers in turn did the same in order to fight it. But there are beings out there, very interested in the book, who don't use the Hellmouth as a power source, and they can be nasty. You need

Xander..."

>
"I guess you're right..." Ash admitted.

>
"Besides," Giles told him, pulling the scarred man close, "You're the only thing close to a father he's ever had, and if you left, I don't think he would take it very well. I tried to do the job, but I never seemed to fit quite right in the place. You do."

>
The Watcher stared straight into Ash's eyes and told him exactly what he meant.

>
"Thanks Rupert...I appreciate all you're telling me...and all you've done to help both of us."

>
"No problem, Mr. Williams," Giles replied, pulling away and giving the S-Mart clerk a small smile, "You know, you're not as much of a stupid bugger as I thought at first. In fact, you're a rather good man."

>
Ash gave him a lop-sided grin, so similar to his charge, and winked.

>
"But Xander will go to college, and make something of himself."

>
"Of that, Mr. Williams..." Giles answered, "I do no doubt. He's a much smarter young man than even he gives himself credit for. Besides, I just saw you kill those creatures with less conviction than I just heard. I have absolutely no doubt..."

>
Ash walked off to think for a while, not to mention plan the summer trip, and Giles took this opportunity to do something he'd been aching to do since they'd been out on the Sunnydale High School lawn.

>
"Oh Angel?" he asked the vampire.

>
"Yes?"

>
"Could you perhaps do me a favor? Just one? Right now?"

>
"Anything..." Angel answered seriously, "Anything at all. I am so sorry for what I did to you, and I owe you so much. Anything, anything..."

>
"Are you quite sure?" Giles asked, his eyes shining, "Don't you want to know what it is?"

>
"Anything..." the souled vampire told him.

>
"Okay..." Giles, responded. Then, he pulled his arm back and punched Angel right in the face like he'd never been punched before. The vampire dropped to the ground, out cold. The Watcher smiled.

>
"Thank you..."

>
On the other side of the room, Xander had just finished telling Faith all about what had happened, and the brunette Slayer looked shocked.

>
"Well?" Xander asked.

>
Faith seemed to wake up, then looked up to Xander.

>
"Congratulations..." she said at last, "I was wondering when she was going to realize what a prime piece she had sitting around for her, instead of moping around thinking about the dead-meat..."

>
"Thank you...I think..."

>
"Well, I wish you would have invited me!" the Slayer told him, getting up from the library stool, "Sounds like you bunch had a lot of fun..."

>
"Oh yeah, tons..." Xander replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm almost as much as he was dripping with goo, "Oodles, bunches..."

>
Faith gave him a playful slap in the shoulder, and he winced.

>
"Sorry..."

>
"No problem..." he replied with a smile, "All in a days work for a Keeper..."

>
"Well, I hope they have a good health care plan..." the Slayer muttered.

>
The two of them were interrupted from more silliness because Buffy came over. Xander's eyes immediately turned soft.

>
"Are you okay? Is your shoulder still bleeding? Do you need a doctor?" he asked, the concern in his tone touching Buffy to the core. He felt badly for not asking sooner.

>
"Yeah, I'm fine." She replied, showing him her arm, which looked okay, "The stuff on me isn't mine...how about you?"

>
"Just peachy..." Xander replied, getting up and embracing her softly so as not to aggravate the arm he knew was still hurting a bit, "I'm glad you're okay..."

>
"Me too..." Buffy said, then she got a little flustered, "I mean, I'm glad you're okay, not that I'm okay, not that I-"

>
He put one finger to her lips, and she was quiet. Then he gave her a gentle hug, and a small peck on the cheek. It felt nice on both Xander's end and Buffy's.

>
Faith picked up the hint, and said, "I think I'll be going now...I don't want to get caught by the clean-up patrol. He'll want me to help with this mess..."

>
Buffy and Xander, who were now staring at one another with the oddest looks on their faces, barely noticed. "Yeah. See ya..."

>
Faith smiled impishly, and then made a hasty exit. It would be good for her friend B to get a little action. Maybe then she'd stop being so very stuffy.

>
As soon as she was gone, Xander asked, "Buffy, why did you decide to ask me out?"

>
"I don't know, Xander..." she replied, putting her arms around him despite the huge mess it would make, "I guess, all through this, I've seen a side of you I didn't know. The side of you I tried to ignore because I didn't want to feel those feelings. I wouldn't admit till now just what a wonderful, romantic, courageous, handsome guy you were because, well, I didn't want to hurt you."

>
"Hurt me?"

>
"Yeah. It seems like everyone I get too close with gets hurt, and in my heart of hearts I knew I could never let anything happen to you...and it took me this long to realize that you were being hurt more by me, by my ignoring you...and for that I am so sorry..."

>
"Okay...it's okay..."

>
"Really?" she asked, looking up into his eyes. They were so full of love for her that she knew she'd never have to ask him again.

>
"Really..." he told her seriously, then he grinned, "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't just because I got buff..."

>
Buffy laughed, and it felt nice to laugh. Nice to be happy. Nice to be in his arms. Now, just one more thing and it would be perfect.

>
"Xander?"

>
"Yes?"

>
"Could you kiss me?"

>
Xander's eyebrow rose at her question. He smiled. He turned his head to the side, and began to lower it down upon her...

>
"Xander, can I talk to you for a minute?"
>
Xander spun to face his best friend and mentor.
>
"You know, you have the worst frickin' timing in the world..." the young man fumed.
>
"It's a gift..." Ash replied with a wicked grin, "Sorry I gotta pull you away from him, toots, but I need to speak with him..."

>
"Sure..." Buffy said, smoldering, "But you had better hurry back..."
>
"I'll get him back quick, I promise..." he answered, "I'm not gonna stand in the way of his love-life, but this is important..."

>
Xander pulled away from Buffy, and joined Ash near the next bookcase.
>
"Now, what is this I'm hearing about low grades, young man?"

>

>
Epilogue
>
+Toronto, Canada+June+
>
The two detectives walked onto the scene, both looking tired and a bit aggravated. The first was tall and blonde, with hazel eyes that seemed more blue at the moment. He wore dark clothing on his reasonably muscular frame, which did nothing to hide his pale complexion. As he walked on the scene, he seemed to sniff the air, much to the confusion of the uniformed officers on the scene. Not that they would bother him about it. This detective was one of the best on the force, everyone knew, and they didn't care how he did it as long as he kept it up. His partner, a rotund dark-haired man who didn't have much left on the top of his head, was also one of the best at the precinct, though while his partner was respected by everyone, he was friends with everyone. But he didn't look very friendly at that moment.
>
"This way, detectives..." said a young uniformed officer, beckoning the two towards the master bedroom, "The bodies in here, and I don't think you've seen anything quite like it..."
>
The blonde smiled to the other, and the two shared a look that read as saying "don't be quite so sure about that". Nonetheless, they followed the young man into the room.
>
What they found was rather peculiar. There was a window broken on the far side of the room, but that was the extent of the damage to property. The body was on the other side of the room, and was slumped next to the wall. Part of his skull was caved in near the front, and old blood ran down the corpse's shirt to form a nearly dried pool at his feet. But the most bizarre thing was the book.
>
It was almost in his lap, but had fallen out most of the way. From there, the two detectives could see it, and it boggled them both for different reasons. The rotund detective was wondering what it was and why the body was holding it, not to mention why it had a face and looked like it had been bound in skin. However, the blonde was confused because he had thought the book had been destroyed centuries ago.
>
"It can't be..." he muttered under his breath, "it just can't!"

>
His partner turned and gave him a look, wondering what the hell was up with him. It was a look the detective gave his co-worker a great deal of the time.
>
And just as he always did, the blonde ignored it. Then he walked over and stared at the book. I just couldn't be!
>
This was his chance. Maybe, just maybe! Maybe in the pages of this book, he would find what he had been searching for for so very

long...for it was...

>
"The Necronomicon..." he whispered in awe, "The Book of the Dead..."

>

>+Sunnydale, California+June

>"I don't want you to go!"

>"But I have to Buffy," Xander told her, putting three more shirts into the small suitcase, "We have to find the book! If we don't, who know what could happen. Someone may find it and read it out loud or something, then we'd be all screwed! Or someone evil could get it..."

>"Yes, but I'm going to miss you, Xand..." the Slayer pleaded, giving him her very best puppy-dog eyes which had never failed her in the past, "It's two whole months till we start college at UC-Sunnydale!"

>"Two whole months," he replied, giving her a small peck on the cheek, "That you'll have to discover just how much you love me and miss me when I'm away..."

>She playfully whacked him on the arm. "But I KNOW I love you already! I don't need that!"

>Xander turned from putting in his pants to give her a lop-sided grin. "You are so cute when you try to connive your way into getting what you want..."

>"And you're so cute when you give me that little grin..." Buffy told him, smiling impishly at her boyfriend, "Now, why do you have to go too?"

>"Because" the young Keeper said tiredly, "He can't do it on his own away from the Hellmouth...he'll need me, wherever we're going, and you know I couldn't let him go when he might get hurt..."

>"I know, Xander, I know..." Buffy replied, moving closer and hugging him gently, "I know he means a lot to you, to all of us, and that you have to help him...but I don't want you to leave!"

>"I'll be gone and back before you know it," Xander answered, giving her a hug and another peck as he pulled them both onto his bed, "And if I could bring you, I would. But Sunnydale does not do good without a Slayer to watch it over the summer..."

>"Yeah..." Buffy said, sounding grumpy and a little upset, "But for this, I no longer owe him for saving my life from Mayor-monster..."

>The young man she loved smiled at her again, then kissed her passionately. When he pulled back, he asked, "I mean as much as a saving of your life? I feel honored!"

>"Of course you do! Even on rent to him!"

>"I'm flattered..."

>The two spent a moment of silence, just being in one another's arms. Xander knew it was going to be a very difficult two months as well, because now he had everything he'd ever wanted. He was free from his father. He had a new father (pretty much) who cared about him enough to risk his neck for him. He had a future. He would be going to UC-Sunnydale with the girls, and he planned on becoming a lawyer. He had his true love. He and Buffy had discovered just how perfect they were together. And he could now help her in her battles. If it wasn't for the damn book, he'd be set; Xander was starting to hate that thing almost as much as Ash.

>"So," Buffy started, realizing that she would just have to keep in constant contact with her Xander-shaped love, "Where do you think you're going?"

>"Well," Xander replied, cuddling next to her, "It feels like it's somewhere north and to the east...maybe Canada or New York...sounds about right...and we'll just have to head in the general direction

that we feel..."

>"Oh..."

>"Nothing more exact than that..." Xander told her.

>"Too bad. You'll have to call me and tell me where to mail you letters, not to mention HoHos and Twinkies..."

>"Are there HoHos and Twinkies in Canada?" Xander asked, suddenly worried that he would be deprived of one of his favorite snacks.

>"No clue..." she answered, "But hopefully, you'll be in New York. And if you are, you had better bring me a nice souvenir!"

>"I promise!" The young man replied, holding up two fingers, "Scout's honor!"

>"And no flirting with anybody! None! You are not allowed to work your irresistible charms on the poor women of this world!"

>"Scout's honor!"

>The Slayer looked at him critically. "Were you really a scout?"

>"Yup."

>"Oh..."

>Xander smiled at her, then read the look on her face. "And no, I will not dress up in the uniform! It's tiny! I haven't worn it since sixth grade!"

>"Tiny works for me..." Buffy whispered seductively.

>"And here I thought you liked my-"

>"In clothing, I mean..."

>"Oh..." Xander replied with a goofy grin on his face. Then he moved the suitcase off the bed, went back to Buffy, and kissed her for all he was worth.

>He had to have SOMETHING to tide him over before he left...

>
+Two Days Later+

>
"Well, we'll be going now!" Ash declared, hauling the last suitcase into the back of his old car.

>
"We're all going to miss you two..." Willow said, hugging Xander first, then Ash as he finished slamming trunk.

>
"Same here, Sam..." Ash replied, using the nickname he had made for the little redheaded witch.

>
"So will I, I must admit." Giles said, trying to clean his glasses and wipe his eyes at the same time, "I will miss your rather unique viewpoints on things, the two of you..."

>
Both of the Keepers smiled, then gave the Watcher a bear hug.

>
"Thank you, thank you..." he said after he was released.

>
"Oz..." Xander said quietly, holding out his hand for the werewolf to shake.

>
"I'll miss you too, man..." he replied as he shook Xander's hand, uncharacteristically pulling him into a hug at the end, "You two take care..."

>
"We will, Oz..." the younger Keeper replied, pulling away, "We will..."

>
Then Xander went up to Cordelia, who looked as beautiful as she always did.

>
"I'll miss you, Xander..." she told him quietly, "I'm leaving too, you know...I'm going to LA to become an actress..."

>
Xander's eyebrow lifted in surprise, but then he pulled her into a hug, which she received well. He told her, "Best of luck! Take care of yourself..."

>
"Thanks, Xander..." she replied, "And thank you, Ash...I really owe you for that time at the Bronze..."

>
And with that Cordy left. She couldn't bare to see them leave. But Xander was curious.

>
"Night at the Bronze?"

>
Ash looked a confused, then answered in a rather righteous tone, "She was attacked by a vampire, all right? Don't go getting any nasty thoughts about me!"

>
"All right, just asking..."

>
And then they got over to Buffy.

>
"We said our goodbyes already," she said, smiling, "But I just wanted to wish you two the best of luck and tell you that I hope you have a good trip..."

>
"Well, thank you, Buffy," Ash replied, putting his hand on Xander's shoulder, "I'll try to get him back to you in one piece..."

>
"You had better!" the Slayer answered with mock severity.

>
Ash laughed. "Listen, I'll be waiting in the car, okay?"

>
"All right, Ash, be there in a minute..." Xander answered distractedly.

>
The Master Keeper smiled knowingly, then walked off.

>
"Well, I'll see you, Buffy..." he said after a moment of silence.

>
"Yeah."

>
"I'll call every night!"

>
"I know..."

>
"I'm gonna miss you, you know..."

>
"I know..."

>
"I love you, Buffy..."

>
The Slayer looked up into his eyes with such love in her own, then pulled him down to-

>
BEEP

>
Buffy looked around for a second until she saw Ash in the car right next to them, but Xander took her chin in his hand, and told her, "Ignore it..."

>
And then they kissed.

>
Xander pulled away after a minute or so with a large smile on his face. Buffy had a huge goofy grin.

>
"I'll see ya..." he yelled after her as she walked back to the group.

>
"Yup..." Buffy replied as he got into the car.

>
"Till...whenever I we come back..." he shouted as they drove away.

>
"Which had better," The Slayer muttered as she watched the car shrink in the distance, "be soon..."

>
In the car, Xander was still grinning. So was Ash, but for a different reason. There was silence.

>
"You really think it's funny?" Xander asked at last.

>
"Yup."

>
"Oh man, then the second you get a girlfriend, you will learn the meaning of 'annoyance'..."

>
There was silence in the car as both parties thought. Xander mused on Buffy, then on the sort of tortures he was going to do to Ash as soon as he could. Ash was thinking of what kinds of things Xander had already done to annoy him on purpose and the thought

depressed him.

>
"I just dug myself a hole, didn't I?"

>
"Yup," Xander replied, "And I will be more than happy to push you in when the opportunity presents itself..."

>
"You suck..."

>
"I know..."

>
There was silence again, which lasted for only a few minutes, then...

>
"Are we there yet?"

>
"Oh God..."

> <p><p>

End

file.